“IS THAT RELIGION?” THE JAZZ PROFESSION AND AFRO-PROTESTANT
CULTURAL REPRESENTATION

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the lives and work of Cabell “Cab” Calloway III (1907-1994), Edward Kennedy “Duke” Ellington (1899-1974), Ella Jane Fitzgerald (1917-1996), and Mary Lou Williams (1910-1981) to analyze these jazz musicians’ practices of representation: professional representations of African Americans and of African American religious expressions, and personal representations of religious and racial commitments and practices. The framework of representation centers the images, scenes, roles, discourses, and music of African American religious practice—often presented as authentic reproduction—as content for popular consumption, criticism, invested religious reflection, and potential religious innovation. Six thematic chapters structure my analysis of racial and religious representations as well as religious beliefs and practices in the twentieth century, covering critical discourses in the black religious press, musicians’ live performances, recording sessions, prose, autobiographies, film, press interviews, business papers, and private reflections for posthumous audiences.

Through these jazz musicians and their representations, this dissertation illuminates the significant Afro-Protestant cultural presence that informed, surrounded, opposed, and contributed artistic fodder for their professional and personal lives. For African American religious history, I contribute a reframing of Afro-Protestantism as a mode of professional, middle-class cultural production relative to other emergent African American religions and their popular cultural production in the first half of the twentieth century. With this study of the jazz profession, scholars may reconsider Afro-Protestantism as a “religious movement” throughout twentieth-century black popular culture, beyond its traditional regard in the language of religious institutions, in order to generate broader notions of African American women and men’s religious “work” and leadership in emerging twentieth-century professions.
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Introduction

Lionel Hampton (1908-2002), an African American multi-instrumentalist (principally, a vibraphonist and percussionist) and composer who entered the jazz profession in the late 1920s as a teenager, had attained by 1940 enough prominence and his own big band to speak regularly on the “state” and trajectory of jazz music. Granted a regular column, “Swing,” in the *Baltimore Afro-American* newspaper, the 32-year-old Hampton used the December 28, 1940 edition to voice his opposition to the recent trend among big bands to “swing” African American spirituals—in this sense, to arrange up-tempo, syncopated versions of these religious songs for popular consumption:

Nobody would think of swingin’ “Ave Maria” or “Silent Night,” yet I often hear bands rip into our spirituals and turn them every which way but loose. To me that’s sacrilege, and I’ll argue anybody, anytime about it.

I walked off a Paramount [Pictures] lot once because some wise guys insisted on burlesquing “Deep River.” As I told a group of young Y[MCA] fellows in Frisco, if we don’t work up our own race pride, who, pray tell me, is going to do it for us?¹

In this column, Hampton made clear his artistic integrity by forgoing a paying performance at Paramount studios, likely for him and the musicians in his employ. Sacred African American music was the cultural possession of Hampton and other African Americans, and to make it in any sense festive or an entertaining commodity was to commit sacrilege and a racial offense. No one should swing it, and no one would think to vulgarize sacred Euro-American Christian music. This popular jazz vibraphonist signaled at once his religious opposition to artists and producers of any race wishing to profit from popularizing African American religious music, and his position as a race representative—a role model for younger black (and in this particular case,

Christian) men who charged them with taking seriously their responsibility to secure African American artistic and entertainment output.

As a jazz artist, black print press columnist, and a convert to Christian Science from Roman Catholicism by 1944, Hampton represented his religion, his race, and his profession to various audiences that scrutinized his religious, racial, and professional commitments. For different communities to take the music seriously, Hampton and others worked to secure jazz music’s reputation as a constructive, creative art form and to assure a fretful, critical religious leadership and cultural elite among African American middle-class Protestants that its composers and performers had their moral bearings. The sense of improper commodification of African American religion for popular consumption, evident by the 1940s in criticisms of jazz for “swinging” spirituals, arose from existing concerns throughout the early twentieth century that popular culture and urban living had impeded African American pursuits of uplift and damaged the race’s unassailable moral standing.

From the late 1920s through the 1950s and 1960s, jazz artists worked to change public opinions about their music’s appropriateness in society. However, nothing was static about this musical genre. Young musicians grew up and matures as artists, and jazz as a competitive profession produced constant innovations in the invention of new rhythms, new ways of playing instruments, new instruments, new vocal techniques, and new sensibilities about the cultural significance of the music as it constituted an art form and a tradition. In the face of religious and nonreligious claims that jazz music represented the opposite of proper culture (meaning, it encouraged indulgences in the immoral or uncivilized pleasures of the urban nightlife, and it was bad-sounding music), several musicians emerged over time who treated their profession as a

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tradition to be defined, refined, defended, and challenged. Given the realities of a segregated America and the desire to challenge this segregation, jazz artists had to claim their profession as an appropriate musical outlet for positive racial representations of African American men and women. Part of that social project was to convince the broader white public in America that the perceived musical gifts or talents of African Americans stemmed from both a proud racial history and a providential story of a faithful race.

This dissertation charts these jazz musicians and their practices of representation—professional representations of African Americans and of African American religious expressions, and personal representations of religious and racial commitments and practices. The concept of representation captures various registers of black religious expressions in twentieth century African American history and popular culture, regardless of a jazz professional’s degree of affiliation or commitment to Afro-Protestant denominations or churches. Representation centers the images, scenes, roles, discourses, and music of African American religious practice—often presented as authentic reproduction—as content for popular consumption, criticism, invested religious reflection, and potential religious innovation. The lives and work of Cab Calloway, Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, and Mary Lou Williams anchor my analysis of racial and religious representations as well as religious beliefs and practices in the middle decades of the twentieth century. As prominent African Americans in an

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3 In the history of civil rights legal activism, according to historian Kenneth Mack, race representation refers to “those who claimed to speak for, stand in for, and advocate for the interests of the larger group.” Since the nineteenth century, for African Americans to call for a “representative colored man” or “representative Negro” has involved a tension between an atypical member of the race in terms of her or his accomplishments and an “authentic” member of the race who was “as much like the masses of black people as possible.” The representative colored men, “…the lucky few who had attained enough education and training to become doctors, dentists, schoolteachers, ministers, and lawyers,” were to serve as the best cases for full and equal African American citizenship. See Kenneth W. Mack, *Representing the Race: The Creation of the Civil Rights Lawyer* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 4-5, 20. Popular black jazz professionals became de facto race representatives because of their coverage in the black and white press, due to their inter/national travel and publicity, and because of the emergence of music criticism.
emerging jazz profession, each of these musicians bore representative racial authority and the ability to represent African American religious belief and practice through live performances, recording sessions, film, prose, press interviews, and private reflections for posthumous audiences.

By focusing on these jazz musicians and their representations, this dissertation illuminates the significant Afro-Protestant cultural presence that informed, surrounded, opposed, and contributed artistic fodder for their professional and personal lives. For African American religious history, I contribute a reframing of Afro-Protestantism as a mode of professional, middle-class cultural production relative to other emergent African American religions and their popular cultural production in the first half of the twentieth century. This study of the jazz profession serves as evidence of, and encouragement for, scholars to reconsider Afro-Protestantism as a “religious movement” throughout twentieth-century black popular culture, beyond its traditional regard in the language of religious institutions, in order to generate broader notions of African American women and men’s religious “work” and leadership in emerging twentieth-century professions.

The Consumer Challenge to Cultivating Christian Race Representatives

At the same time that early twentieth-century urbanization fostered a substantial African American middle class, it produced as well a consumer culture that challenged existing Victorian ideals of stability, thrift, and refinement that characterized late-nineteenth-century strategies of racial uplift.4 Historian of race and gender in the American South Angela Hornsby-Gutting notes

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4 Martin Summers summarizes the early twentieth century’s “new” African American middle class as “a socioeconomic stratum that was defined by occupation, wealth, and skill, as much as it was by the subjective markers of ancestry, culture, and education that had constituted the parameters of the old nineteenth-century black elite. By the second and third decades of the century, a new elite composed of entrepreneurs, professionals, and skilled workers, and whose existence was tied to the segregated world of consumer capitalism, vied with the traditional black aristocracy for the economic, political, and moral leadership of the race.” In considering the black middle class to be
that this crop of middle-class race leaders encountered the urban landscape’s leisure culture and its asserted forms of recreation as freewheeling spontaneity, a new cultural value which jeopardized depictions of African Americans as a race progressing rapidly toward “civilization.” The construction of urban arenas like the dance hall and the nickelodeon, Hornsby-Gutting writes, “…afforded blacks the space and anonymity to experiment with new identities beyond that dictated within the stiff rubric of Victorianism, which remained a central component of race uplift ideology.” Black middle-class leaders’ principal concerns were the rural black migrants to cities whom they deemed susceptible to gambling parlors and saloons, illicit private activities (along with courting) occurring in new public forums that resulted from “[t]he freedom to mingle in an unregulated environment with men and women of varying classes and ages.”

For race leaders in positions of religious leadership in the 1920s and 1930s, new forms of leisure continued to present a social dilemma in the American South and North. These aspiring race leaders encountered, debated, and at times accommodated an evolving leisure culture beyond their professional regulation that black working-class migrants and middle-class inhabitants alike found alluring.

Historian of African American religions Judith Weisenfeld has noted the contest over popular entertainments in the early twentieth century that jeopardized the unique standing of African American churches as the center of black social, educational, economic, and political

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an “ideological self-invention” in part, Martin notes that the older elite black middle-class “positions of journalists, ministers, educators, and entrepreneurs who catered to a white clientele” faced the emergence of new black middle-class professions, consisting of “social workers, lawyers, doctors, and dentists; small entrepreneurs who increasingly serviced segregated communities, such as grocers, retailers, beauticians, restaurateurs, hoteliers, real estate agents, and undertakers; and individuals engaged in larger financial ventures such as banks, building and loan associations, and insurance companies.” See Summers, *Manliness and Its Discontents: The Black Middle Class and the Transformation of Masculinity, 1900-1930* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 6-7.

activity, in addition to threatening to undermine these religious institutions’ authority in these matters. These churches “were in the midst of a cultural shift that involved the separation of many of these activities from their purview, and their leaders felt the potential for churches’ cultural influence to decrease.” Black popular entertainments emerged through “film, theater, nightclubs, professional sports, and radio as well as consumer items like beauty products, records, literature, newspapers, magazines, and toys marketed specifically to their communities.”6 And according to historian of Brooklyn’s African American churches Clarence Taylor, some church leaders responded by “offering their own brand of popular entertainment, remaining moral leaders of the community as they attempted to adopt mass forms within the boundaries of Christian principles.”7

Furthermore, historian of African American religions Lerone Martin has stated that for African American social leaders, intellectuals, and Protestant ministers, various forms of entertainment became a problem for the race to address in the early twentieth century. At the turn of the century, W. E. B. Du Bois claimed that the rise of black commercial entertainment was to become a chief challenge for urban churches to address in the new century. Black ministers rendered such entertainments a moral problem because, as in the case of the largely rural black Baptist congregations, responding to popular recreation required overhauling these churches’ missions for the new black urban reality. In the 1920s, African American leaders advocated and worked toward providing migrant churchgoers alternative, bourgeois forms of commercial entertainment, such as creating alternative amusement spaces, hosting annual festivals for concert and opera performances, or church sponsorship of musicals, operas, race

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films, and dances. These black leaders included Dr. George E. Haynes, Secretary of the Federal Council of Churches’ Commission on the Church and Race Relations; Rev. Lacy Kirk Williams, pastor of Olivet Baptist Church in Chicago and president of the National Baptist Convention; Jane Edna Hunter, founder of the Phillis Wheatley Association and member of the National Association of Colored Women; and Rev. Henry Hugh Proctor, pastor of First Congregational Church in Atlanta.⁸

These black middle-class Protestants who criticized jazz, dance, or popular entertainment went beyond theologically conservative moral opposition; as the first chapter of the dissertation demonstrates, their protestations reflected their middle-class, interracial, ecumenical, and integrationist pursuits of racial progress. Importantly, this progress depended on cultivating and maintaining a professional class of African Americans, and these prominent religious voices in the press, pulpit, and academy made no room for the emerging popular art form as a viable alternative profession for moral representation of African American culture and society. Jazz historians like Kathy Ogren have focused on black religious opposition to blues and jazz music and the ministers who targeted urban migrants with alternative, “wholesome” forms of recreation to keep them from patronizing the dens of urban vice.⁹ With the first chapter, I complement existing scholarship on working-class black migrants by revealing the religious leaders who focused on middle-class black youth and black professionals, instead of black migrants, because they charged these populations with forging the race’s progress in the present and future.

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While concerns about the cultural and moral worth of jazz lingered for black Christian clergy over the next few decades, the music came to represent an idealized set of democratic and expressive possibilities in the Cold War era and functioned as a reflection on the progressive strides of civil rights activism. This evolution in perception accompanied innovations and developments in music and performance, where jazz enjoyed a smaller audience no longer interested in big band dance music and more invested in the music as a listening, intellectual artistic experience that small instrumental combos created. Fans and professional critics signified jazz musicians as artistic virtuosos, America’s international cultural ambassadors, and representatives of an elite African American culture capable of capturing, through music, the sounds, moods, and political desires of a people.\(^\text{10}\) Jazz musicians who were religious even consecrated the music for spiritual purposes—Lionel Hampton eventually composed works like the “King David Suite” to express his adoration of the nation of Israel. However, a jazz music eventually deemed appropriate for race representation and religious expression had precursors in the early twentieth century among other forms of African American artistic production.

**Popular Black Religious Representation in Entertainment**

Before and during the rise of popular jazz musicians like Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway, major African American musical artists, composers, and film impresarios who were intimately familiar with African American Protestant religious expressions were producing representations of African American religiosity in classical compositions, operas, modern spiritual compositions, theatrical productions, race records, short films, radio programs, and major motion pictures. Concerning the musicians, these artists participated in projects of racial

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uplift that stemmed from romantic schools of musical composition and performance, inspired in part by European musical nationalist composers like Antonin Dvořák (1841-1904). According to music historian Lawrence Schenbeck, Dvořák’s “advocacy of African American and American Indian music as the ideal basis of high art had the effect of pushing these folk sources from the margins toward the broad, safe center of American musical life.” Dvořák had two prominent African American students: composer and baritone singer Harry T. Burleigh (1866-1949) and composer and violinist Will Marion Cook (1869-1944). In 1916, Burleigh produced *Jubilee Songs of the United States of America*, and “[w]idespread use of Burleigh’s spiritual arrangements in the recitals of ranking American singers of the day contributed further to the acceptance of the spiritual as authentic American music worthy of cultivation by serious musicians.”\(^\text{11}\)

Following Burleigh in the classical tradition of African American cultural production at the beginning of the twentieth century was R. Nathaniel Dett (1882-1943), a Canadian-born composer, choir director, and writer. Through his music, from the 1900s until the end of his life in the 1940s, Dett presented African American Protestantism defensively, striving “to create an atmosphere of piety and solemnity in his choral concert performances, which usually emphasized sacred music, especially spirituals in one form or another. He found in those songs the absolute antithesis of the degrading blackface minstrel ditties that remained a commonplace of American popular theater in the early twentieth century.”\(^\text{12}\) Dett’s central project, according to Schenbeck, was “that of battling racism by eliminating the secular—and especially the erotic—in Negro

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\(^{12}\) Further, writes Schenbeck, “To Dett, the worst damage done by minstrelsy had come when black religious songs were treated as material for comedy. ‘I felt,’ he wrote [in his 1920 writing *The Emancipation of Negro Music*], approvingly quoting his Hampton colleague Robert R. Moton, ‘that these white men were making fun, not only of our color and of our songs, but also of our religion.’” 117-118.
music.”13 Elements of non-religious African American life permitted modern artists to construct “primitivist” representations of African Americans as essential racial markers, and “[o]ne had to avoid, at all costs, association with negative stereotypes that migrated so easily from black popular styles and white imitations of them. Otherwise the degree of distinction (read class distinction) inherent in ‘the best class of Negro music’ would never be recognized, and its efficacy in uplift would be lost.”14 In light of this artistic project—to protect African American cultural representations by weeding out notions impiety and moral impurity from black folk, thereby combating the pervasive blackface minstrelsy—comical portraits of African American Protestantism by popular entertainers appropriating folk religious expressions in the jazz professions were certain to stray far from romantic ideals of racial and religious representation.

Many white Americans were eager to consume African American musical culture in the 1920s, and as Schenbeck writes, “The relatively widespread adoption of arranged spirituals by white and black classical artists alike, combined with their genteel sentiment, unstintingly earnest tone, and obligatory lack of wit, rendered them less attractive to a white avant-garde seeking cultural work that mirrored its own alienation from mainstream American culture after World War I.” For these white consumers, jazz and blues became their preferred African American music, with jazz representing “youthful vitality, rebellion, sophistication, and sensitivity toward the racial Other in a way that radically reinscribed white definitions of blackness and reconfigured white elites’ usages of black music.”15 However, the popular rise of jazz and blues did not signal the end of African American musicians’ efforts to proffer the spirituals. Beyond

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13 Schenbeck continues, “For [Dett], black folk music was not exotic material to be mined for ‘purely’ musical interest, with the usual disingenuous modernist subtexts of novelty, sensuality, and grotesquerie. This ‘rough timber’ had the potential to model respectability.” Schenbeck, 145.
14 Schenbeck, 145.
15 Schenbeck, 131.
African American classical artists and composers, choral singing of the spirituals carried the sounds and images of African American Protestant culture further into mainstream American entertainment with advancements in the industries of film, radio, music, and theater. The works of Will Marion Cook, another Dvořák student who produced popular African American music for Broadway musicals in the early twentieth century, establish an alternative lineage for the “uplifting” promotion of African American Protestant cultural production with his use of African American folk cultural elements. Cook was one of Duke Ellington’s songwriting instructors, and according to Harlem Renaissance scholar Paul Anderson, Alain Locke considered Cook “the real father of symphonic jazz,” a genre for which many Ellington compositions became exemplary.\textsuperscript{16} Ellington showcased one of his earliest symphonic jazz compositions, “Black and Tan Fantasy,” in the 1929 short film \textit{Black and Tan} that also featured the spiritual sights and sounds of the Hall Johnson choir.

Another African American cultural producer in the alternative lineage of Cook was the prominent spiritual arranger, composer, and choral director Eva Jessye (1895-1992). Jessye first met Cook while she attended Kansas’s Quindaro State Normal School (affiliated with the African Methodist Episcopal, or AME, church), and Cook provided her professional and publishing connections in her early career. Judith Weisenfeld discusses Jessye’s collection of her spiritual arrangements in 1927, titled \textit{My Spirituals}, and the collection’s “music-drama” style of spirituals became popular with African American concert performers like Paul Robeson.\textsuperscript{17}


\textsuperscript{17} Judith Weisenfeld writes that with \textit{My Spirituals}, “Jessye’s interest in preserving the history of African American musical traditions becomes clear, as does her deep commitment to crafting a narrative of African American history and cultures through the use of spirituals.” Weisenfeld, “‘Truths that Liberate the Soul’: Eva Jessye and the Politics of Religious Performance,” in \textit{Women and Religion in the African Diaspora: Knowledge, Power, and Performance}, R. Marie Griffith and Barbara Dianne Savage, eds. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 225-228.
Jessye’s repertoire of spirituals established a performance style of African American religious music that was intentionally dramatic—she crafted performances of “authentic” religious emotionality through her selection of vocal performers and in her arranging and composing instructions for them to act out certain verses, constructing an atmosphere of “spontaneity within an overall unity.”

During the mid-1920s-1930s, at the time that Cab Calloway underwent his professional rise and performed religious humor through swing music, Jessye was creating and directing large choirs, like the Dixie Jubilee Singers, the Eva Jessye Choir, and a male quartet called The Four Dusty Travelers who performed on radio programs, for phonograph records, in MGM feature films like King Vidor’s *Hallelujah* (1929), in Virgil Thomson and Gertrude Stein’s opera *Four Saints in Three Acts*, and in George Gershwin and DuBose Heyward’s Broadway play *Porgy and Bess* (1935). However, Jessye’s presentation of spirituals in non-religious, commercial arenas inevitably garnered her critical ire, resulting in her decision to stop performing on stage shows and in films.

In addition to Jessye, Francis Hall Johnson (1888-1970) commanded a reputation for representing black Protestantism within Hollywood, arranging music for more than thirty feature films, shorts, and cartoons from the 1920s through the 1940s with a choir that became a fixture

Of Jessye’s value as an authoritative African American religious woman, Weisenfeld writes, “Jessye used the arts to assert her authority regardless of gender, to act as an interpreter of scripture and as a Christian evangelist within and outside church institutions and before racially diverse audiences.” “‘Truths that Liberate the Soul’,” 243.

Weisenfeld also writes that King Vidor claimed to the black and white press that the African American actors’ performances in *Hallelujah* were “natural” expressions of “the negro race,” evidencing for him, in Weisenfeld’s assessment, “a racially compromised moral sensibility, sexualized religious expression, and emotional musical display devoid of deeper theological content.” Jessye “countered Vidor’s claim of the set as dominated by the true religious frenzy of the black cast members. In her accounts of the film’s production published by the black press, Jessye wrote of the intense preparation the cast members undertook for various scenes and interpreted their strong responses when being filmed as the result of their professionalism and preparation….She also asserted that her own training and dedication to the job contributed to the realistic sense of the film’s religious scenes, as well as easing Vidor’s job.” Weisenfeld, *Hollywood Be Thy Name*, 43-44.

“‘Truths that Liberate the Soul’,” 230-231.
on film and for many film soundtracks. Johnson’s productions and performances of spirituals served as a counterbalance to white playwrights who depended on their commodification for white audiences and, as Weisenfeld illuminates through a study of his Bible reading habits, Johnson went further with his own compositions to engage in religious explorations beyond the conventions of the era’s black Protestantism.\(^{21}\) Beyond directing the Hall Johnson choir, Johnson also employed vernacular African American religious elements with his music, critiquing “the conservative tendencies and restrictive parochialism of some black church members and leaders and insist[ing] on the ability of the individual religious self to range freely across a variety of spiritual possibilities.”\(^{22}\)

Musical representations of black Protestant culture existed within the “race film” industry of African American-directed and produced motion pictures, spurring an entertainment form wherein African American religious life became a commonplace subject of representation and commentary. Featuring all-black casts, these films presented several examples of “uneducated, corrupt, scheming, or ineffectual” black ministers in an interwar era where African Americans increasingly turned to social and political leadership beyond sole reliance on black religious institutions. The African American filmmaker, writer, director, and producer Oscar Micheaux (1884-1951) was known for his “scathing criticism of black clergy” through more than thirty race films between 1919 and 1948, such as the 1925 silent film *Body and Soul*, which provided a con man preacher (played by Paul Robeson) in addition to an extended church scene that

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\(^{22}\) “‘The Secret at the Root’,” 42.
highlighted an emotional congregation’s responses to their deceitful preacher’s sermon theatrics. Weisenfeld writes that for Micheaux, “the overly emotional approach to worship in some black churches makes black congregations more susceptible to manipulation by unscrupulous clergy. He proposes, instead, a sedate, rational religiosity grounded in knowledge of the Bible as a key to the uplift of African American communities.” Micheaux’s portraits of ministers, even when showcasing ideal preachers for black audiences to support and follow (like juxtaposing the “race conscious” preacher Dr. V. Vivian with the unlettered preacher Old Ned in the 1919 silent film *Within Our Gates*), maintained a critical portrait that was dramatic and absent the levity of humorous parody.23

On a variety of popular fronts, Dett, Jessye, and Johnson served as cultural guardians of African American spirituals throughout the 1920s and 1930s, refuting assertions that Hollywood productions featuring depictions of African American Protestantism through music or acting represented or captured authentic religious expression. Micheaux’s works, starting in the silent film era and produced for black audiences, set a template for African American self-depictions that were of upstanding religious figures or cautionary presentations of nefarious and unlettered preachers and their naïve, unwitting church members. As the second chapter of this dissertation demonstrates, while Cab Calloway may have been fond of Micheaux’s critical treatment of African American folk religious expression and its consequences, this singer and bandleader rendered African American Protestant culture an object to elicit laughter from familiar, consuming black audiences.

The world of the arts and entertainment of the 1920s and 1930s saw the commodification of black Protestant sights, sounds, and bodily performances for modern, racially uplifting

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purposes; and black jazz entertainers were able to participate in this racial and religious project. Conversely, they were also able to mine this fertile religious soil to produce modern forms of intimate humor, principally for black audiences to enjoy, distinct in performance from the racial and religious representations of white minstrels in blackface, and seemingly lacking the longstanding black religious concerns that such musical comedy was counterproductive to social and political progress. Jazz was popular music, and African Americans had to defend their cultural ownership of it for fans and detractors alike. Part of this defense was to root the new, modern music in a tradition of African American musics, tracing it through the blues, ragtime, the spirituals, and ultimately through the sounds of gospel and West African music. As was the case with prominent historians like Carter G. Woodson, black musicians who were committed to constructing noble narratives of African American history engaged in the parallel constructions of musical versions of proud racial histories (even though, as this dissertation’s first chapter shows, Woodson loathed jazz music and culture). And because this is the specific case of African Americans, these stories told through music unavoidably reflected themes of deeply devout black Christian women and men from the antebellum slave period into the twentieth century.

**Critical Conversations and Interventions**

This dissertation engages both the history of jazz and the study of African American religions by taking seriously the careers of jazz women vocalists and instrumentalists alongside jazz men as professionals, by adopting an expansive concept of sources and sites constituting the archive of race representation and religious expression, and by offering theoretical concepts relating the categories of humor, race, profession, and religion in middle-class black cultural production.
The Gender and Instruments of Jazz Musicianship

Black women’s work to construct the jazz profession in a culturally respected manner contributed to generations of male and female musicians who produced compositions and performances with racial and religious significance. In his effort to comprehend “the centrality of masculinity in the formulations and interpretations of jazz artistry,” Eric Porter defines a “masculine Romanticism” in musicians’ own writings about their music and in jazz historiography: “Most jazz musicians have been male, and it has generally been men (primarily black men and white men) who have defined the jazz discourse. African American male musicians…have often expressed their own masculinity, as well as a belief in the patrilineal development of the jazz tradition, when defining their artistic projects.” Addressing the particular rendering of religious prose in (and musicians’ religious discourse about) jazz music as spirituality, Porter asserts that the general assumption is that “[u]ltimately, it is the male musician who embarks on a Romantic path of spiritual creativity.” As professional musicians, black musicians like Ella Fitzgerald were subject to black and white press commentary on skin tone, hairstyles, dress, body size, and facial expressions when performing; beyond appearance, women musicians encountered vocal scrutiny in the assessment of their “racial” sound by music critics. Fitzgerald responded to audience and critics’ perceptions of the vocal tactics an African American woman must employ to signify that her music had “soul,” a demand that an emerging market of black gospel music produced (which had an impact on popular black female vocalization for the rest of the century).

Vocal jazz scholar Lara Pellegrinelli writes that the focus on instrumental musicians in jazz is “peculiar” given “the historiographic focus on vocal forms within African American music broadly speaking—from spirituals and the blues to soul and hip-hop…” Because, as Pellegrinelli claims, the historiography has coded the blues as “feminine” and ragtime as “masculine” in identifying the musical parentage of jazz, women became marginalized in chronologies of the music to a degree that does not match their actual status in the profession’s early decades. Instead, in the pursuit of elevating jazz as “art,” “…many authors attempted to divorce it from low culture and the entertainment contexts with which singing was associated,” thereby “focus[ing] their attention on horns that sound like voices, an elevation of ‘raw’ musical materials” rather than providing any substantial attention to female vocal traditions.

Furthermore, Pellegrinelli claims that three historical trends in jazz literature—“‘great man’ histories that render the artist as hero, the divorce between jazz and its entertainment contexts, [and] the removal of its associations with vernacular culture, and, hence, lyrics”—produced the “erasure of women” from prominent narratives.25

Musicians like Mary Lou Williams navigated assessments of their “manliness” or natural representation of conventional images of African American women in American culture, and my chapters on Fitzgerald and Williams assert the importance of their public and private work in fashioning the jazz profession as a prominent venue for race representation.26


26 See Nichole T. Rustin, “‘Mary Lou Williams Plays Like a Man!’ Gender, Genius, and Difference in Black Music Discourse,” South Atlantic Quarterly vol. 104, no. 3 (Summer 2005): 445-462.
Archival Orientations

This dissertation depends upon a cultural orientation toward the concept of religion that historian of African American religions Wallace Best’s work to reveal the “new sacred order” for African American Christians in Migration-era Chicago models. With respect to forging communities and institutions, religion and “the sacred” are “mutually reinforcing modalities that find expression as the cultural production of their adherents,” and Chicago’s Migration-era black Christians, in particular, “actively produced a religious cultural expression that reflected social, cultural, and political concerns.”27 As a pursuit of comprehending African American religious expressions in cultural production, this dissertation is an interdisciplinary project engaging constructions of racial identity that appear in public, along with articulations of religious commitment that appear in public and private, by attending to the broader print culture surrounding musicianship. These materials include jazz composition manuscripts, artists’ private libraries and literature, advertisements and reviews in the black and white print press, jazz journals, concert booklets, African American magazines, and contemporary works in jazz history and criticism. Important for the second part of this dissertation, I also include musicians’ mail correspondences (letters, greeting cards, business papers), and even lyrics scribbled on hotel stationery pondering theological matters. Additionally, this dissertation involves the study of audiovisual materials—studio and live concert recordings, animated short films, feature films, television specials, and candid and “staged” photography as public imagery—all in the effort to characterize the sights, spaces, and sounds of African American racial and religious representation. This expansive concept of archival resources incorporates black jazz

professionals, their religious and racial representations in performance and composition, their more private articulations of belief, and their public reception by press and critical audiences into the definitions of cultural production that constitute religious practice in the field of African American religious history.

*Irreverence in African American Religions*

My study of Cab Calloway in the first half of this dissertation entertains the potentially inextricable link in African American Protestant traditions between being religious and being religiously irreverent. Does parody provide levity that lessens the association of an individual’s religious devotion with an irreproachable moral status? Have African Americans with religious commitments appreciated irreverent religious humor that may register as anti-religious without necessarily rejecting all things associated with religious fidelity? Stereotypes and parodies of religious men and women represent an appreciation that relies on familiarity. Performers may present social criticisms and perceived moral (sexual, financial) hypocrisies that consuming audiences identify and recognize, respectively, but without an explicit dismissal overall of religious practices and beliefs in most cases. For performers to present compelling parodies of African American Protestantism, and for audiences to accept these productions as comical for their compelling authenticity, there must be some degree of sustained engagement with these black religious traditions as they evolved over the long twentieth century. Calloway’s performances reveal that various songs and musicians in the early decades of jazz captured the presence of this link between religious familiarity and religious irreverence in African American entertainment.

I attend to the unintended consequences of religiously irreverent African American entertainment, for these comical musical works certainly produced stereotypical religious and
racial perceptions of African Americans in the broader white society that many considered counterproductive to black social and political progress. Therefore, I also entertain the question of the connection between religious irreverence and racial irreverence, in the particular case of one black musician who became a de facto race representative.

Musicologist Charles Hiroshi Garrett has outlined the inherent dilemma in writing about jazz humor. There has historically been a gap between the musical humorists who “often poke fun at aesthetic conventions and embrace irreverence” and the scholars of music who have advocated concepts of “aesthetic coherence and unity.” Additionally, musical humor offered immediate rewards to audiences because of its accessibility and relevance, an aspect of musical production that scholars have overlooked because their focus on forms of music that appeared more complex and encouraged deep contemplation. Lastly, noting the peril of “draining its comic life or failing to do justice to its creative spark,” Garrett quotes the composer Leonard Bernstein on comical music: “The main trouble is that the minute you explain why something is funny, it isn’t so funny any more.”

Some performances by Cab Calloway and Ella Fitzgerald confirm Garrett’s assertion that jazz humor may extend beyond instrumental musicians with the work of vocalists, because “[t]heir imaginative vocals, lyrical play, and comedic stagecraft have opened up wide vistas for creating jazz humor.” But Garrett notes that in jazz scholarship more generally, with a debate over understanding jazz more as art than entertainment, Calloway the entertainer does not enjoy canonical status given the nature of his entertainment in racially charged, segregated circumstances.

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29 Garrett, 54. Garrett writes, “[Calloway] is usually treated as a figure peripheral to the jazz canon, dismissed as more caricature than musician. To a certain extent, this has to do with critical bias against any musical figures who blend humor, jazz, and popular entertainment. Calloway has been criticized because of his band’s light-hearted
This subject does not represent uncharted territory in the study of popular African American music in the twentieth century. Teresa L. Reed connects religious caricature in popular music to histories of minstrelsy, discrepancies between African American Christianities in the rural South and urban North, African American “jokelore” directed at religious figures, and a disillusionment with “traditional churches” or “organized religion” by many African Americans in the century’s middle decades before the modern civil rights movement. I build upon Reed’s significant scholarship on “jokelore” by suggesting “irreverence” as a more useful concept for (African American) religious studies, because it brings into focus the labor of performance in constructing religious parodies, beyond simply focusing on the transmission of colloquial or vernacular humor about African American religions in poetry, prose, and song.

Chapter Structure

In Part I, “Professional Representations,” I argue that black jazz musicians emerged as popular, professional race leaders because of the work of African American middle-class Protestants in the first half of the twentieth century to model religious and racial representations of African Americans as professional duties. The emergence of jazz presented a leisure culture that religious African American middle-class professional men and women decried. Black Protestant middle-class youth who enjoyed this culture emerged from it as black jazz professionals and jazz aficionados in the black press, and they shaped the music they loved into repertory, because he perpetuated certain stage techniques long associated with blackface minstrelsy, and because he was an African American performer who catered largely to white audiences at venues such as the Cotton Club. Decked out in spectacular garb and flashing an enormous grin, he went so far to entertain these audiences that his early career has been depicted as something of a tragedy in which he was allowed only to play a demeaning, subservient role, as if his aim to please defeated any opportunity for producing real art. At the same time, of course, Calloway can be defended for being able to establish his career, doing his best under especially challenging circumstances, and using humor as a strategy to entertain audiences, connect with them, and earn a living.” Garrett, 60.

an art form they declared to be an appropriate, alternative vehicle for race representation. Accompanying jazz professionals’ race representation in (un)intentional forms were various expressions of prominent African American religious belief and practices in the early twentieth century, which I explore through three major themes: (1) irreverent performances of African American religious leadership and expressive acts of worship; (2) a sacralization of “Africa” in narratives of African American history; and (3) with celebrated jazz musicians who committed to black Protestants’ social and political activism against Jim Crow through the desegregation of performing venues, through financial support of civil rights activism, and through intentional crossover racial appeal.

The first chapter introduces one group of race representatives—educated black middle-class Protestant clergy, academics, and writers in the religious and non-religious black press in the 1920s and 1930s—whom I call “religious race professionals.” I introduce the concept of religious race professionalism to capture the variety of religiously-invested black middle-class race leaders, beyond a focus on those leading prominent black Protestant denominations and churches. This chapter focuses on these men and women’s professional work as cultural critics who incorporated strong and dramatic language to criticize “jazz” along with a perceived “jazz culture” and its effects on the morality of youth. These men and women generated and participated in commentary on the religious image and moral standing of black middle-class youth and churches because of their commitment to race representation. They maintained that the black middle class’s duty was to act as the race’s brokers to white America on behalf of working- and middle-class blacks in order to ensure African American economic, social, and political advancement, and they argued that middle-class black youth must emerge as the next generation of committed, irreproachable leaders.
In depicting the professional objectives of the African American Protestant mainline in the 1920s and 1930s, the first chapter relies primarily on the circulation of their written discourses through denominational networks. A valuable and critical resource is the *The Star of Zion*, the weekly paper of African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (AMEZ) that is relatively unexamined by historians of African American religions, in comparison to other historical studies of African Americans.\(^{31}\) *The Star of Zion’s* position as the print outlet of a black Protestant mainline denomination with a comprehensive primary focus on domestic African American affairs stands in contrast to the more internationalist missionary focuses of the black Baptist and AME print publications. These religious periodicals, which circulated throughout the nation according to the landscape of each denomination’s churches and schools, reflected middle-class black Protestant efforts to produce a national religious identity for black America and to claim the position as its professional racial and religious representatives. By focusing on religious race professionals, the first chapter highlights black professional figures with religious commitments and critical religious investments as they generated a print discourse about the modern business of black religious institutions and leaders.

The second chapter on Cab Calloway gleans much from his 1976 autobiography, *Of Minnie the Moocher & Me*, wherein he conveys a tone of irreverence and humor about his black

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middle-class youth and various life circumstances thereafter. Regarding Calloway’s church life, which he constantly narrated humorously, this chapter demonstrates that such irreverence was never full-throated maliciousness; rather, Calloway attempted to convey through music and prose the humor he found with religiosity, never providing the reader clear denunciations of religious persons or institutions. Nevertheless, his musical production did signal his decision to withdraw from regular participation in the institutional life of black Protestantism in a manner that resonated with the decisions of many other African Americans who preferred Saturday leisure to Sunday service.

I draw on Calloway’s autobiography because, as jazz scholar Christopher Harlos notes, the authorship of jazz autobiographies parallels the musical genre. Harlos writes that “…like jazz itself, where the completely solo performance is atypical, jazz autobiography also easily lends itself to being produced on a collective basis.” 32 To compose his autobiography, Calloway collaborated with Bryant Rollins, the African American author, columnist, playwright, and editor for the New York Sunday Times and New York Amsterdam News. 33 Such collaborative efforts represent jazz musicians’ intentions to offer their own historical narratives, collectively forging a “musician-as-historian” ethos in popular culture as a response to the inauthenticity of jazz histories that musicians perceived non-musicians to produce. 34 For jazz scholar Holly Farrington, racial representation is evident in the production of more than forty jazz

34 Harlos writes, “If there is an overarching sentiment that a good deal written about the music does not necessarily correspond with the sensibility or even lived experience of the musicians themselves, then it seems reasonable to conclude that within the burgeoning collection of [jazz] autobiography there exists a significant alternative to ‘mainstream’ jazz history. So the expansion of jazz autobiography has, among other things, brought the discursive (i.e., nonmusical) voice of the jazz musician in direct contact and dialogue with history, and by consequence, the ethos of the musician-as-historian has risen exponentially.” Harlos, 137.
autobiographies between 1936 and 1996. Duke Ellington’s 1973 autobiography, *Music Is My Mistress*, revealed that the musician was “always on stage” when performing, and “his racial identity forced him to become a representative, linking public perception of African Americans irretrievably to the individual achievement of celebrities and artists such as himself.” Employing David K. Danow’s schema of epic, mythic, and labyrinthine as the three basic types of narrative, Farrington classifies Calloway’s autobiography as a labyrinth because of “the lack of personal fulfillment” that leads to “existential…wandering” she finds in it.\(^{35}\)

The autobiography, as a document, cannot be considered a literary vehicle to convey reliably the absolute and authentic truth about every moment in Calloway’s life. It can, however, reveal the author’s own attempt to arrange the details of his life to make meaning of who he was and what experiences he recalled as formative, instructive, or pivotal, whether or not they were also enjoyable.\(^{36}\) For the reader, then, Calloway’s biography reveals that he attempted to convey a humorous and irreverent portrait of himself, a reliable indicator that he sought to identify these qualities in many aspects of his life.

Moving from explicit racial and religious irreverence to reverence, the third chapter situates Duke Ellington’s musical compositions in the early-twentieth-century black Protestant narrative of an African American history emerging from, and connected to, a sacred African past including biblical scriptures and ancient African civilizations. Academic literature, black Protestant race record sermons, public intellectual engagement in the religious and non-religious black press, and popular music represented collective African American Protestant efforts to

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\(^{36}\) It is likely that Calloway viewed the autobiography as an opportunity to justify his career choices, particularly since his comedic choices included African American stereotypes that had a more racist history in minstrelsy as an entertainment form.
make sacred the ancient civilizations of the African continent, dark-skinned biblical peoples, and to render the enslaved African experience in the United States—with its eventual black Protestant institutions—as an extension of that sacred African history. Late-nineteenth century Pan-African engagement with West Africa, recent discoveries in archeology and Egyptology, and the cultural production of the Harlem Renaissance influenced popular black Protestant expressions of reverence for African American history and a reading of ancient biblical (and extra-biblical) civilizations as the record of African contributions to civilization. In this chapter, Ellington’s music, poetry, and prose accompany an examination of other early twentieth century black cultural producers who contributed to this sacralizing, reverential view of Africa and its ancient religious women and men.

The fourth chapter situates Ella Fitzgerald, who did not produce extensive written discourse about her profession, as nevertheless both central to debates over genre, gender, and racial performance within the jazz world and as the producer of racial and religious representations through her vocal performances. Focusing on the evolution of Fitzgerald’s vocal jazz career represents a departure from the standard narrative of jazz virtuosity that centers the work of black male musicians, and this chapter affords a comprehension of the artistic self-fashioning practices of male and female performers in the big band/Swing era of the 1930s, in the “bebop revolution” of the 1940s, and in the emergence of solo jazz artists throughout these eras and beyond. As music historian Eden E. Kainer notes, Amiri Baraka’s omission of Fitzgerald when discussing the bebop scene in Black Music, relying instead on Billie Holiday (1915-1959) as a representative for all jazz women, “reflects Fitzgerald’s stance on the periphery of the academic jazz community, and the role of female jazz vocalist as a blanket category,” despite Fitzgerald’s long career as a scat singer who toured with bebop pioneer John Birks
“Dizzy” Gillespie (1917-1993) in the late 1940s and 1950s. The work of this chapter displaces a bop/postbop jazz virtuoso-driven narrative—which focuses regularly on black men—to add complexity to the portrait of the jazz profession and to reveal how some African American jazz women participated in the production of religious and racial sensibilities alongside their male colleagues in the profession.

Part II, “Personal Religious Expressions,” moves this dissertation from thematic general discussions of jazz as a professional venue for racial and religious representation to more specific focuses on two African American pianists and composers in the jazz tradition, Edward Kennedy “Duke” Ellington and Mary Lou Williams. Ellington and Williams fashioned public personae as race representatives and had significant religious statements to express in the late 1950s, 1960s, and into the 1970s. These musicians operated within a jazz profession that underwent a decades-long transition in social status from its association with a vicious urban nightlife that corrupted black youth to its treatment as a virtuosic art form conducive to progressive race representation. Key to these famous musicians’ self-awareness as race representatives is the preservation of their documents in national and university archives, with Ellington’s materials at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of American History and Williams’s records at Rutgers University’s Institute of Jazz Studies. Both Ellington and Williams produced sacred jazz music through album recordings and religious concerts, and their archives often reflected detailed thought processes and business organization required to manage and produce these professional endeavors. With these chapters, I rely on these musicians’ archives to locate their religious practices and articulations of belief.

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The fifth chapter focuses on Duke Ellington, a prominent African American race representative who served such a role in white religious spaces, although the religious literature and influential conversation partners he enjoyed did not emerge from African American Christian denominations or thinkers. Ellington did not situate his sacred music in the mainline African American Protestantism of Washington, D.C. in which his parents raised him. Rather, Ellington engaged an explicitly ecumenical religious project that brought him into the world of white mainline liberal Protestantism in the United States and Western Europe. Additionally, the theological reflections Ellington produced with his sacred musical compositions reveal both his manner of wrestling with appropriate language to address and characterize the nature of God and his noteworthy omission of language about Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. These linguistic theological concerns represented Ellington’s responses as a composer of sacred music who moved primarily throughout white mainline Christian religious spaces to the issues and discourses of liberal Christianity.

Moreover, while Ellington implicitly bore the task of representing African American Christianity in his new music, his primary familiarity with African American religious life was relegated to his childhood, where he spent Sundays between his father’s AMEZ church and his mother’s National Baptist Convention, U.S.A. (NBC) church. Engagement with the evolving expressions and theologies of African American Protestantism in the first half of the twentieth century was absent in Ellington’s adulthood, and he gravitated more toward white mainline Protestant leaders, thinkers, and religious spaces. His sister, Ruth, a significant champion of Ellington’s religious legacy and a congregant at St. Peter’s Lutheran Church in Manhattan, was
similarly situated between white mainline and white evangelical religious worlds. Gospel developed as a popular African American music form and industry in the years between Ellington’s religious youth and his Sacred Concerts in the mid-1960s, and its popularity spread throughout African American Christianity (from Holiness-Pentecostal churches to the Baptist and Methodist mainline). Consequently, a significant temporal and theological gulf existed between Ellington’s religious life and that of many African American Christians, despite Ellington’s de facto task of serving as African American racial and religious representative to predominantly white mainline Protestant audiences. In this light, the greater posthumous popularity of Ellington’s sacred music in white American mainline and European Protestant churches is not an ironic outcome, and these are the congregations that continue to perform his compositions annually.

Largely absent in the historical study of African American religions are the narratives of individual African American religious belief, whereas in jazz history, the study of Duke Ellington is an industry in itself. The fifth chapter interprets Ellington’s recorded private thoughts about believing in God in relation to the religious practice of constructing and performing sacred music publicly. The chapter focuses squarely on Ellington’s affirmation of religiosity while revealing that such a stance did not necessarily mean the total acceptance of any denomination’s teachings about Christianity, even as he mostly navigated Christian religious spaces. However, I also qualify the “individuality” of Ellington’s religious belief and expression, interrogating not only the religious literature he engaged but also incorporating the people responsible for shaping (and responding to) his religious pronouncements. With this

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chapter, the notes that Ellington wrote on hotel stationery during his tours emerge as a unique form of literature for interpreting individual theological statements and commitments, and such literature allows for a portrait of “lay” engagement with and production of theology as a process of “working out” individual commitments.

The sixth chapter mines the business archive of Mary Lou Williams to reveal her religious commitments and energy through efforts to realize her vision of the Bel Canto Foundation, a professional institution she worked to establish in order to care for jazz men and women. The pursuit of a Bel Canto Foundation was Williams’s work to create a structure and facility to care for musicians struggling with substance abuse, as she had personally cared for many in her apartment. Biographies of Williams have examined her productive sacred jazz period and career revival extensively, while the absence of sufficient attention to her business pursuits in this period results in the dismissal of an arena of her personal and professional labor that exemplifies a novel form of religious work.

Mary Lou Williams was born with a “veil” and had visions as a child, and she likely had a family of religious people around her who encouraged a notion of her wielding spiritual gifts. But Williams did not explore “conventional” religious traditions until after the death of Charlie Parker from years of hard substance abuse. Williams engaged in prayer and “ascetic” practices like fasting and abstaining from purchasing luxuries. This followed an intense period of continued visions and accompanied close friendships with jazz trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie and his wife Lorraine, a Catholic convert. Lorraine encouraged Williams’s exploration of Catholicism, while Dizzy encouraged her to return to performing music. She viewed her music, and the music industry itself, as antithetical to her religious mission before meeting a black Catholic friar, Mario Hancock, who encouraged her to compose religious reflections as part of her calling.
The 1960s and 1970s saw Williams composing many religious works. The Roman Catholic reforms of Vatican II afforded her a vehicle to promote the concept of “sacred jazz” by providing music “for the disturbed soul.” Her music for Catholic liturgy contained Gospel influences, and Williams, as a champion of jazz education, sought to make clear to others the roots of authentic American music in spirituals and the blues. *Black Christ of the Andes* celebrated the 17th century Afro-Peruvian Catholic Saint Martin de Porres, “Dirge Blues” was a memorial to President Kennedy (the first Catholic U.S. president), and concerts like *Praise the Lord in Many Voices*, *Mass for Lenten Season* and *Mass for Peace* saw Williams and her music circulating throughout Catholic churches in an attempt to get a male-dominated and formerly segregated religious institution to take seriously her musical talents, religious sincerity, and the general presence of black Catholics. In the early 1970s, Williams articulated the sacred origins of jazz through a particular African American heritage:

> Through our suffering God took pity on us and created the world’s greatest true art: the “Negro Spirituals” and from the Spirituals: Jazz was born in all its creative and progressive forms….Jazz is also a healer of the mind and soul. God reaches others through it to bring peace and happiness to those who know how to listen to it.  

Williams reiterated her belief about jazz music’s divine origins in a 1978 interview, adding the notion that performing and listening to the music had spiritually therapeutic benefits: “God did blacks a favor by creating jazz especially for them. God helps people through jazz; people have been healed through it. It has happened to me.”

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This dissertation mines jazz archives, in part, to relate the emergence of mass popular culture and professional music entertainers in the twentieth century to African American Protestant religious institutions and public representatives in order to entertain the possible dilution, dissipation, transfer, or acquisition of social and cultural authority. Following these six chapters, this dissertation’s conclusion presents a preliminary theoretical suggestion: various practices of African American middle-class racial and religious representation, as evident in this focus on the jazz profession, portray African American cultural production in the twentieth century as indebted to Afro-Protestantism. Furthermore, I frame Afro-Protestantism as a mode of constructing culture, as well as akin to a religious movement, beyond a conventional scholarly regard for black Protestants as a collective of Christian institutions. If Afro-Protestantism constituted both a culture and a movement in twentieth-century African American life, its defining characteristics were: (1) the consciously and racially representative articulation of religious belief; (2) the practice of religious affiliation which permitted and celebrated an irreverent (dis)regard for—or suspicion of—institutional religious leadership, often resulting in critical cultural productions; (3) a racialized approach to reading (through and around) scripture that was subject to contemporaneous studies of antiquity and afforded recognition of the modern West’s history of African enslavement and Jim Crow legacy; and (4) the affirmation or generation of alternative racial, professional, and gendered concepts of religious leadership through novel ways of speaking and acting in public, encompassing varieties of artistic performances. Judith Weisenfeld’s study of 1930s and 1940s race films reveals that black Protestant ministers’ anxieties over the future of religious leadership, in light of an enticing black entertainment world, became evident in the morally didactic nature of film themes that highlighted urban commercial culture and corrupted, uneducated church leadership as problems
to remedy. Their leadership of the race “had begun to be displaced by electoral politics and the arts…as the primary avenue for developing social and political leadership.”41 Beyond styles of political rhetoric emerging from black religious institutions as public spheres, it was through African American middle-class cultural production that Afro-Protestantism entered and found a place in an expressive arena of representation. Within this popular arena, African American cultural producers, as professionals, bore the ability to celebrate, debate, lampoon, and imagine new or alternative visions for racial and religious understandings of self and community.

This dissertation’s archival research, analysis, and the theoretical categories emerging from such work suggest the fruitful possibilities for scholars who examine other professions in African American history for novel expressions of belief, representations of race, and practices of religious affiliation and leadership. Ultimately, I conceptualize of Afro-Protestantism as a religious movement and mode of cultural production, borne out principally among black middle-class professionals, to offer a productive scholarly category of religious orientation as an alternative to scholarly pursuits of a definite “black liberal Protestant” tradition across Christian denominations. I also offer the concept of Afro-Protestant to avoid the normatively-charged language of “the Black Church” as a singular, trans-denominational social and political entity. As popular culture’s preeminent race representatives in the twentieth century’s middle decades, black jazz musicians engaged in the expressions of belief and representations of race that an Afro-Protestant presence and orientation made possible.

Chapter One
“They are not God-conscious; they are jazz crazy”: Religious Race Professionals and Countercultural Clerics

Introduction

The August 8, 1918 issue of *The Star of Zion*, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) church’s weekly publication, featured an article titled “Dancing of the Doctors.” The article focused on the recent Doctors and Dental Association Meeting in Salisbury, North Carolina, a gathering of African American medical and dental professionals. The Ministerial Association of Salisbury condemned “the dance given in that city,” with *The Star of Zion* noting that such dancing “cannot be associated with practical christianity [sic]” in any form, given that “it constitutes no part of religion nor does it represent any principle in religion; it is foreign to
everything belonging to religion—being indulged in by Christian people notwithstanding.” This worldly amusement, while not occurring under religious auspices, was a problem for the Ministerial Association and the *Star of Zion*’s Methodist clergy “in the interest of the public moral welfare” and for its ability to affect its participants’ moral character negatively, the consequences of which applied to the broader public and its black youth:

If the vulgarities common to Negro dances, were allowed by such a high order of race representatives as our Doctors and Dentists, then the ministers were right in condemning it. The “Bunny hug,” “turkey trot,” “fox trot,” “Walkin’ the dog,” “the wiggle,” “the muscle dance,” and especially the “Shimmie-Shi-Wabble,” are decidedly vulgar performances, if executed in the most artistic, genteel and modernized manner. They are unbecoming decent people to practice in private much less in public, and if this is the best our doctors and dentists can furnish upon their [festive] occasions as an amusement for our boys and girls, we, wish the Ministerial Association employ them to find some more decent procedure for the enjoyment of our young members of the race. There nothing indicated in their graduation, diplomas, practice, sense of honor, and decency that would allow them to assist in the demoralizing of young manhood, prostituting young womanhood, desecrating public morals and compromising their own honor and professions.\(^1\)

For AMEZ ministers who fashioned themselves leaders of the race, addressing the questionable moral and social behavior of black professionals, who were also race representatives, was far from ranking among their desired priorities in the aftermath of The Great War. Nevertheless, these African American “religious race professionals” attempted to articulate in print and pulpit an opposition to forms of popular entertainment and modern recreation that they regarded as detrimental to racial progress and morality. They regarded this era as bearing much promise for interracial action, with the articulation of a modern Christianity as a common denominator between black and white Americans. Race professionals, whether in official positions of religious leadership or not, must be exemplary role models for black youth—referred to as “our

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\(^1\) “Dancing of the Doctors,” *The Star of Zion*, August 8, 1918, 4. Bold text indicates document damage in the original.
boys and girls” and “our young members of the race”—and to corrupt young manhood and young womanhood served to undermine the labor of their educational and professional preparation for race representation. For race professionals to succumb to the temptations of modern life was to destroy their effectiveness, and message, as potential race representatives.

The religious race professionals who provided editorial commentary on such African American social gatherings used their denominational newspapers and the black press to articulate and construct their Protestant ministries as modern professions in light of various challenges to their authority as race representatives in the 1920s and 1930s. This chapter depicts an African American Protestant mainline in the era that jazz emerged as a distinct profession that competed with middle-class African American religious leaders for the minds, time, and even finances of African American youth. These churches and clergy were already facing the criticisms of African American intellectuals who questioned the aims of their ministries as well as the moral and intellectual fitness of their ministers. While juggling constant intellectual chastisement, they also faced the shifting rhetorical terrain of the era’s religious modernism, which required their nimble navigation to represent their race as religiously modern to likeminded middle-class black Protestants and to white Protestant religious practitioners.²

In the early 1920s, the attitude of at least one African American doctor reflected the sentiment that race representatives had no business indulging in popular entertainment. In 1923,

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² However, the conversations that religiously modern African Americans shared in the black religious press may not have easily comported with the attitudes of black church parishioners, especially older ones. In 1927, Kelly Miller lamented the balancing act that black ministers must perform to assuage older congregants and keep younger ones from dismissing the religious institution: “There is not an avowed Negro modernist in America. If so, he must needs keep his modernity in the back part of his mind; for the good and sufficient reason that the older half of his congregation would repudiate him utterly. But the younger generation is shot through with the newer interpretation. There is an almost impossible task to hold them enthusiastically to the same mode of interpretation which the elders demand to satisfy their faith. The Negro clergyman deserves great sympathy in the dual task of such great spiritual complexity.” See Miller, “Is the Negro Church Deteriorating?” The Star of Zion, March 3, 1927, 8.
the Harlem medical physician and Garveyite E. Elliott Rawlins characterized jazz music as an addictive intoxicant with the power to alter cognitive capability:

From time immemorial, the fact has been known that music has an effect upon the brain. Music can soothe and music can stimulate. Music has made you cry, and music has made you laugh. In the same way music can bring you into a reflective mood, in which the mind ponders, thinks and reasons. By the same process music may overstimulate, confuse and finally paralyze the thinking and reasoning center of the brain, and leave you intoxicated and drugged. This latter effect is the predominating result of jazz music. In these days of prohibition, it frequently takes the place of whiskey, wine and beer.

Rawlins further claimed, “In the social life of the people today jazz music is king, and jazz music will reign until a spiritual awakening and reformation sweeps like a whirlwind over the land.”

The anticipation of another war, financial crisis, or “some devastating catastrophe” was Rawlins’ only prospect for ending the American addiction to jazz music and beginning the work of spiritually reforming its citizens. Until then, popular black audiences were morally vulnerable as patrons of this entertainment form, for “the quick and staccato tempo of jazz music, with the plaintive and pleading notes of the violin and clarinet; the screeching of the horns; the moaning of the trombone; the calling and imploring tones of the saxophone; the rhythmic beating of the drums[,] all these send a continuous whirl of impressionable stimulation to the brain producing thoughts and imaginations which overpower the will.”

Rawlins moderated his opposition two years later, even though he shifted his metaphor of jazz as an intoxicant to jazz as controlled substance: “Jazz as a drug is a benefit in its place, but it should not be used by the very young, or in copious amounts by the old. Jazz, like any other drug, should be used only when needed, in a specific dose, and by those who know how it should be used. A little jazz is all right and proper;

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an overdose is harmful." Whereas Rawlins’s professional claim was that young black men and women’s enjoyment of jazz would result in their physical harm, the religious race representatives who agreed with his disapproval sought to oppose modern recreational forms without appearing to champion an African American Protestant Christianity that was fundamentally opposed to the interests of modern youth.

Opposition to dancing as popular entertainment became the framework for religious race professionals initially to protest jazz—the music eventually associated with popular dances—and these professionals contested with the non-religious black press concerning both the value of their religious criticisms and the worth of the alternative forms of recreation that they offered to modern black youth as the representatives responsible for shaping them into culturally well-rounded adults. Beyond these tasks, the “jazz religion” of charismatic itinerant ministers and emotional displays of worship, both resulting from the emerging Great Migration’s urban presence of Holiness-Pentecostal preaching and worship styles, challenged the reserved, refined, and educated atmosphere that these middle-class black Protestants forged with modern worship and sermonic habits to represent their race’s modern propriety. For these religious race professionals, who had settled well into their pulpits and papers as authoritative cultural critics and who aspired to maintain an always-contested status as race representatives, popular entertainment’s potential allure as an alternative, competing profession for race representation necessitated strong and dramatic language to criticize jazz and its effects on the morality of youth.

Jazz music was an intoxicant both iniquitous and ubiquitous, curiously capable of enjoyment by African American professionals like physicians and, thereby, suggesting it was not

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4 E. Elliott Rawlins, “Keeping Fit: Jazz—A Drug,” *New York Amsterdam News*, April 1, 1925, 16.
entirely conducive to personal destruction as a number of ministers contended. If many African American Protestant churches in the early decades of the twentieth century were in actual competition with emerging forms of popular entertainment for the moral, social, and financial allegiance of African Americans, then scholarship must emphasize the reality that these working, middle, and professional black classes all found these forms of entertainment appealing. I contend that entertaining music, in particular, was not just a challenge to African American Protestant churches’ religious authority within the race. Ultimately, jazz provided middle-class and/or professionally-oriented African Americans a competing venue for race representation.

With the emergence of jazz, the sounds accompanying and producing modern dancing in parties and night clubs, the transfer of black middle-class social authority from educated black Protestant ministers to the world of black entertainment became possible. However, this was not the total shift of authority from one black professional realm to another. As the music’s black ministerial critics evince, the black Protestant religious profession comprised artistic performance, the fashioning of dramatic personae, and the cultural authority to make moral, social, or political pronouncements. Whether the members of a younger African American generation who were aspiring toward jazz music as a profession were dedicated church parishioners or not, they bloomed from a cultural garden that these religious professionals tilled, and they inherited and brought into their entertainment profession the cultural leeway to fashion their work in such racially representative ways that were performative, dramatic or charismatic, and authoritative. This chapter highlights the modern black Protestant professionals who tended to that garden in the 1920s and 1930s.

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The first section explores Carter G. Woodson and other professional black intellectuals whose critical discourses engaged the social place of African American churches and clergy. Next, the chapter presents middle-class black Protestants who engaged those critical concerns and offered their own modern religious discourses. The third and fourth sections highlight the efforts of religious race professionals to debate and determine the appropriateness of recreation, entertainment, and theatricality in both the daily lives and religious aesthetics of black Protestants. These debates responded to the rise of popular entertainments and entertaining preachers, which middle-class black clergy deemed representative of a detrimental “jazz culture.” The last chapter section presents direct criticism of jazz by middle-class black ministers and intellectuals, before concluding with jazz’s prospect to emerge as an alternative arena for the practice of interracial community, beyond the interracial ecumenism and fellowships that middle-class black ministers forged.

**Woodson and African American Intellectual Gripes with African American Protestants**

The civil rights activist Channing H. Tobias and the Congregational minister Jesse E. Moorland asked Carter G. Woodson to produce a book for the YMCA press to counter W. D. Weatherford’s 1912 work, *Present Forces in Negro Progress*. Woodson’s unpublished 1921 manuscript, initially titled “The Case of the Negro,” was his attempt to respond to the racism of Weatherford, a prominent YMCA figure and supporter of African Americans who also promoted white superiority. However, Woodson criticized African American ministers in his book, prompting Tobias and Moorland to cease supporting it.6 “The Case of the Negro” expressed Woodson’s optimism in the early years following World War I for progressive black elites’

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potential to advance African Americans through “creating schools, establishing opportunity, and proper leadership.” And this optimism extended to black religious leaders, the best of whom headed “institutional” churches that addressed community social needs.7

“The Case of the Negro” presented ostensibly objective generalizations about African Americans and their religious orientations while also revealing Woodson’s implicitly critical evaluations of such religiosity in the post-World War I era. Addressing the perception that African Americans were “irreligiously religious,” meaning that they embraced and expressed religious emotionality without expressing (as individuals) a change in ethical or moral behavior, Woodson conceded this charge but placed blame principally on African American clergymen: “Many preachers themselves, the leaders of the race, those who stand above and beyond all others in the estimation of the Negroes, are greatly at fault in this respect. They have too often used their position of influence as a means to exploit the virtue of their women and the pockets of their parishioners. It is very difficult to find a minister who has not been branded as being a little crooked in handling the finances of his church or in his connection with the women of his congregation.” Woodson offered a common criticism of African American preachers that highlighted the pursuit of fame and wealth through expensive clothes, cars, and church edifices, all while neglecting to “enlighten their communicants as to the solution of the economic problems of life.” He further criticized ministers who preached moral righteousness as the ultimate solution to African American plight in segregated America, labeling this recommendation about personal habits a vague, ineffectacious platitude: “The preachers still contend that righteousness exalteth a nation and sin is a reproach to any people, but they have not as yet figured out exactly what righteousness is. It has been a sort of a blind effort in the dark, a

7 Carter G. Woodson’s Appeal, xxxiii, xxxv-xxxvi.
general proclamation intended to cover a number of things intangible and which in the end does not produce the desired results.”

Modern “institutional church” leaders stood in contrast to these preachers, and Woodson listed many who represented African American congregations in white Protestant denominations. While critical of African American Protestants who had not embraced a more engaged social presence, Woodson also criticized white Americans for appearing to abandon literal conceptions of ultimate paradise and judgment and, instead, deifying whiteness through the institution of Jim Crow.

“The Case of the Negro” also framed black Protestant religiosity alongside what Woodson considered the absence of genuine religion among whites. “The blacks are superior to whites in that they are more religious,” Woodson wrote. “It must be admitted that many Negroes are more superstitious than religious, but in holding on to religion until a more forceful factor for inhibition can be developed, the Negroes have thereby maintained a system which serves them as a moral police force.” Woodson’s generalizations about African American religiosity in this manuscript reveal his ambivalence about the ultimate value of religion as a “factor” for the race’s advancement, serving practically, to him, as a system of restraint. Woodson stated there was a general, literalist embrace of the Bible “in word and spirit” by African Americans, and he conjectured that many African Americans were “wisely conservative in dealing with their

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8 Carter G. Woodson’s Appeal, 83-85.
9 Carter G. Woodson’s Appeal, 85-87.
10 Woodson wrote, “This failure to look out for a man in this life is an unfortunate situation in the Negro church at the very time when the white man has an entirely different attitude toward religion. Few white people now think of a hereafter in the sense of men living on a beautiful island of by-and-by or being doomed to torment in a lake that burns with fire and brimstone. They no longer have the former conception of God, the indulgent Father, which they engrafted upon the minds of the Negroes first brought to this country. God in the mind of the white man is his race. His race is supreme and absolute among the other races of the world. One would inquire: Where is their Christianity? Where is their regard for the brotherhood of man and fatherhood of God? These principles with them are things of the past. The white people believe in a new theology, which has for its main tenet the principle that, if there is a conflict between the interests of the white race and the teachings of Christ, the interests of the white race must stand first. The Negro unfortunately knows too little of the social revolution which has taken place in the world, if he fails to understand this situation and to conduct himself accordingly.” Carter G. Woodson’s Appeal, 87-88.
“oppressors” because they believed in Christian doctrines of eternal punishment after death.\textsuperscript{11}

Despite their perceived religious superiority, Woodson also characterized African Americans as increasing in infidelity “[b]ecause of the incongruity between the white man’s profession and practice” of Christianity. He then named several prominent white figures whose support for Jim Crow colored their Christianity:

How can one expect the Negroes to maintain their faith in God when you insist that Lyman Abbott and Charles Parkhurst, who preach segregation, represent God? What credence will the Negro give to the efficacy of the Christian religion, if you contend that in the United States one finds an example of a righteous nation, despite the fact that its policies are shaped by inconsiderate and narrow-minded prejudiced charlatans like William Howard Taft and Woodrow Wilson, who have no desire to rule justly but merely endeavor to serve efficiently the machines by which they are controlled.\textsuperscript{12}

Although unpublished, Woodson’s “The Case of the Negro” reveals a set of critical attitudes about African American Protestantism and perceived emphases on religious emotionality and moralizing that Woodson and other black social and intellectual leaders, alongside progressive educated black clergy, sought to reform or improve upon as they set out to forge a modern black Protestantism for the new era. As historian of African American religion Barbara Savage has written, Woodson continued to develop and articulate his criticisms and prescriptions for African American Protestantism in the 1930s, most notably arguing for a “United Negro Church” and aligning himself with African American religious “modernists”

\textsuperscript{11} Woodson added, “It would be difficult to imagine exactly how the racial conflict would have worked out in this country if the Negro, like the white man, had abandoned this sort of religion without accepting some other system to secure restraint.” \textit{Carter G. Woodson’s Appeal}, 112-113.

\textsuperscript{12} Further, Woodson wrote, “The Negro, therefore, has little faith in the [Western world’s] so-called Christian civilization. He is not inclined to ascribe to this religion in its corrupted form the credit which it has received as the supreme and absolute in bringing the world to its present advanced stage. The Negro, a Christian himself, does not doubt the power of the principles enunciated by Jesus of Nazareth. He contends that this religion has not yet been tried. The Negro agrees with that writer who says that whites nailed Christianity to the cross. There is much doubt that actual Christianity ever existed in Europe and even if it did, it suffered an untimely death in transit across the Atlantic.” \textit{Carter G. Woodson’s Appeal}, 144-146.
against both the “fundamentalists” of the race and those “extremists” who advocated African Americans dismissing churches wholesale as effective social institutions.13

In 1921, Woodson’s *The History of the Negro Church* covered an early history of missionary encounter to African slaves, the development of the free black Protestant denominations (National Baptist Convention [NBC], African Methodist Episcopal [AME], AME Zion, Colored Methodist Episcopal [CME]), and the political efforts of their respective clergymen. Woodson highlighted the importance of these denominational institutions for their ability to bring forward politically-minded leaders interested in the progress of the race. He distinguished these “progressive” churchmen who valued education (religious and secular) in addition to valorizing white American notions of religious worship, church structure, and moral propriety, from the “conservatives” who appreciated the institution of African American Christianity as they had experienced it before Emancipation, given that it was then the sole social institution operated by African Americans. In his move to the contemporary period of the early twentieth century with “The Negro Church of Today,” Woodson focused on defending black Christian denominational institutions in the face of “a few radical members of the race” who viewed them collectively as a conservative force impeding black social progress.14 Woodson argued, “The church then is no longer the voice of one man crying in the wilderness, but a spiritual organization at last becoming alive to the needs of a people handicapped by social distinctions of which the race must gradually free itself to do here in this life that which will assure the larger life to come.” Social improvement needed to come before divine reward, and

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 Negro churches were practical in their efforts to fight segregation and in funding the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). 

The 1945 edition of *The History of the Negro Church* concluded with a short chapter on the rise of “New Temples for Strange Prophets,” a brief assessment of the failings of the conventional black Protestant Christian denominations and the rise of “cults” with autocratic leadership. Woodson claimed that the departure of black intellectuals from Christianity—based on their view of Christian hypocrisy in the sanction of American slavery—left the “mentally underdeveloped Negroes at the mercy of the ignorant ministry and unprincipled cult leaders” and that they kept alive the “old time religion of the emotional, shouting fathers…greatly influenced by the African war dances,” this time in a “war on sin.” These so-called cults were flourishing in urban centers that black migrants populated, namely, “Washington, Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York, Boston, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Detroit, Chicago, and St. Louis,” and Woodson identified them as the Mount Sinai Holy Church of America, Inc., the United House of Prayer for All People, the Church of God, the Church of God in Christ, the Church of God and Saints in Christ, the Moorish Science Temple of America, the Father Divine Peace Mission Movement, and the “Mohammedans.”

Woodson’s categorization of the aforementioned religious organizations as cults, his historiography privileging the male religious leadership as the effective social and political leadership, and his rooting of contemporary practices (especially charismatic ones) in an African past continued Du Bois’s strategies and purposes of typifying African American religion as a largely Christian endeavor with specific normative prospects in the arenas of fighting Jim Crow

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15 Woodson, 280.
16 Woodson, 301.
17 Woodson, 301-303.
segregation and uplifting African American communities. In addition to Woodson, Barbara Savage has detailed the criticisms that educated elite black men and women like W. E. B. Du Bois, Kelly Miller, Ida B. Wells, Fannie Williams, Anna Julia Cooper, and Mary Church Terrell leveled against African American ministers for corruption, lack of education when black clerical training was available, and for permitting emotional religiosity. Such criticisms represented these leaders’ efforts to spur African American churches toward political activism.18

In the 1920s and 1930s, Woodson’s middle-class black Protestant contemporaries in established denominations bore these latter responsibilities as race professionals heading “spiritual organizations,” doubly charged with addressing the practices and policing the preachers of other religious African Americans who challenged their religiously modern ideals.

**African American Middle-Class Protestants and Religious Modernism**

It was the Negro preacher who began leading his race into the promised land of education when in His Own time the Good Lord set the Negro free. Most of the early Negro ministers had no training save what they picked up themselves. But as the necessity for learning to read the Bible grew strong upon them, they began gradually to become educated and gladly received the help given them by the white people. Teaching, the law, and medicine were added in time to the first profession which appealed to the Negroes, and today there are approximately 100,000 Negro professional men and women out of a total Negro population of 11,891,143.

—The Literary Digest19

As Mrs. J. S. Williams wrote in the *Afri-co-American Presbyterian*, “There is no profession or class of men so much criticised as the preachers.”20 Ministers in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) Church often felt slighted by W. E. B. Du Bois in particular, evident in AMEZ Rev. W. W. Evans’s 1921 article where he addressed the prominent black

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19 Reprinted in *The Star of Zion*, May 17, 1934, 1.
intellectual’s criticism of African American churches as too conservative and moralizing on matters of leisure and recreation, too encouraging of Christian prayer as a solution to worldly problems, and too dependent on religious revivals. While Evans found “such things as card-playing, going to theaters, and dancing” to be “innocent” pastimes, he distinguished between “members of the Church” and “members of Christ’s body,” with the latter group “dead to the world” and “crucified in the flesh,” meaning such amusements did not tempt them. While it was simply human for “members of the Church” to engage in such innocent amusements, Evans cautioned that they “have yet to work out their own salvation in fear and trembling”—although without the AMEZ church’s punishment. Evans also prescribed the use of religious revivals in moderation, writing that “they are essential to the spiritual awakening of the Church. Like everything else, like dancing, drinking, smoking, card-playing, they are subject to abuse and must be used discreetly, advisedly and discriminatingly.” However, Du Bois referred to black Methodists as “[t]he black wing of the Methodist Church” and accused them of being the sole obstacle to lifting bans on the worldly amusements of dancing, attending theatres, and playing cards. Rev. William J. Walls (1885-1975), then-Star of Zion editor who was consecrated an AMEZ bishop in 1924, delivered a caustic response to Du Bois:

21 Referencing the New Testament parable of the wheat and the tares (Matt. 13:24-30), Evans wrote, “I as an individual have no objection to the members of the church, so long as they have not yet come to that stage of spiritual consciousness, engaging in innocent amusements, for if they do not, they will not be human, and hence the Master said: ‘let the wheat and the tares grow together until the harvest,’ and as no man is able to discriminate between the righteous and the unrighteous why should the Church punish when Christ would not have done so?” W. W. Evans, “Dr. W. E. B. Dubois and the New Negro Church. A Review,” The Star of Zion, August 18, 1921, 1.
23 The Star of Zion reprinted a portion of Du Bois’s article: “There is a singular fight in the Methodist Church in which the black man is arbiter. The majority of white Methodists have realized long since that it is false to say that all dancing, all card-playing, all theatre going, and all ‘worldly’ amusements’ are wrong. They wish to change the dictum of the church so as to accord with universal Christian practice. The black wing of the Methodist Church has long prevented this change. This is not only wrong; it is dangerous.” To this specific charge, Wells replied, “It is all tommy-rot to talk about ‘changing the dictum of the church so as to accord with universal Christian practice.’ Fine words! beguiling language! such as that writer is capable of using, but the insidious poison hidden in his advice is
Great men make mistakes occasionally and sometimes frequently. As frequently as when they attempt to speak with authority on subjects beyond and external to the world in which they have lived and wrought…

It is well that the Crisis whose editor is an authority in history and sociology confine its advice to the realm in which he is an authority. He has been accorded leadership by a large group of intellectuals in the race; but leadership in political and social matters. Nobody has ever accused him of being religious. Hard and dry and matter-of-fact with scarcely a little interest in the supernatural, Mr. DuBois [sic] comes forth to say that the Negroes of the Methodist Church are wrong because they have convictions from their observations and experience in governing the church…

…The trouble is, the writer has gotten beyond his realm. A man whose life is lived and whose deeds are wrought from such an angle and with such ability as his ought to know his limitation. He cannot advise religious leaders. He knows little about Christian practice. He studies it from the surface; he has small and compromising notions of Jesus Christ. Christianity is like any other convenient system in his way of thinking which should be moulded [sic] to suit our desires…

We would advise Mr. DuBois to stay out of church matters until he gets into the church, or gets the church into him. We invite him to the Methodist mourner’s bench and when we are satisfied that he has humbled himself sufficiently at the foot of the cross we will thank him for his advice.24

Walls referred to the segregated white Methodist Episcopal Church, South’s opposition to recreation in order to render Du Bois’s criticism an unfair characterization of African American Christians, exclusively, as anti-modern in their conservative stance and wholly at odds with their white Methodist counterparts.25 Importantly, Walls’s editorial response both represented black Protestant leaders questioning Du Bois’s religious commitments (not to mention the substance of his familiarity with Christianity) and revealed the existence of a generation of black religious leaders at odds with the black intellectuals who caricatured and criticized them. Black Methodist clergy’s antagonism toward Du Bois nearly materialized as public confrontation. The summer of

more dangerous to the race and to our entire civilization than anything which he has said.” William J. Walls, “Mr. DuBois Dabbles in Methodism,” The Star of Zion, Jun 1, 1922, 4.
24 “Mr. DuBois Dabbles in Methodism.”
25 Walls wrote, “As a matter of fact, the agitators for the repealing of the general rules in the Methodist Episcopal Church have been a blatant minority.” “Mr. DuBois Dabbles in Methodism.”
July 1922 saw Du Bois withdrawing from an AME engagement in New York, where senior AME clergy learned that several of their ministers conspired to “hoot him down” at his planned address to these churchmen. The AME bishops apologized to Du Bois, and Walls concurred with their gesture in one of his *Star of Zion* editorials.26

It was difficult for black mainline denominations to bear elite black intellectual criticisms, given their efforts to cultivate a crop of ministers to serve as these desired race representatives. Before the Great War, the *A. M. E. Church Review* reiterated this representative status for African American clergy as “a mission to American [read: white] Christianity.” Among the many charges of the black male minister, the editorial declared that he was to combat the dehumanizing influence of Jim Crowism, awaken the American conscience against the crime of lynching, [and] to uphold political justice and civic righteousness…”27 For AMEZ ministers in the postwar period, an ostensibly conservative support for prohibition stood alongside a modern religious agenda. *The Star of Zion* often reprinted articles from *The Crisis*—despite personal disagreements with one of the magazine’s founders—providing its readership with national news of progressive racial politics alongside the denomination’s theological teachings, AMEZ women’s writings on education, and editorials frequently addressing national social, racial, and political matters. One of Walls’s early editorials responded to a black evangelist who criticized a meeting of ministers responding to the Chicago race riot of 1919 and supporting a memorial for African American soldiers who fought in France in The Great War. According to Walls, this evangelist wanted “the cause of evangelism” and “the souls of men” to be the sole

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concerns for these ministers. Walls characterized this argument as out of step with modern black ministers (“We are glad that this is not the rule of the race ministry any more”), a “fallacious teaching” that missed Christianity’s prescriptive potential to address matters like racial violence: “Our religion is suited to all living matters….It is good religion to know the cause of outbreaks between the races and how to stop them. The man or set of men who would discover the solvent to this and other momentous evils in society will go a long stride in applying Christianity to real life.” Furthermore, Walls supported the vision of black Protestant religious leadership that encouraged the presence of other race representatives to create a division of labor in addressing racial inequality: “We should preach business, profession, and economy, and encourage education, race spirit and a Christian vision for invention, discovery and independent manhood. Christ came that we might have abundant life…What sense is there in the Christian leadership of such a striving people as ours remaining a one track leadership in the midst of conditions such as we face?”

Higher education and lifelong religious study were vital for this modern black Protestant ministry. Of the ministers with high school or college educations who did not continue in their religious studies, Walls lamented, “We frequently hear sermons from this class of men that are tame and toothless.” Walls claimed that these ministers neglected the history of God’s lifelong studious messengers, represented in the Apostle Paul, John Wesley, nineteenth century AMEZ Bishop J. W. Hood, and Frederick Douglass. “God never did use ignorance to write or preach His word. Consecrated knowledge has always and always shall be His annal of revelation and the interpretation of His will.” Walls cautioned *The Star of Zion*’s ministerial readership, “A minister who does not study is suspicious of those who do, and takes it out in his pulpit by

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slurring at people of superior learning to himself.” \(^{29}\) The black preachers obstinately averse to scholarly training were not simply relics for this Methodist denomination in the 1920s—they failed to measure up to the educational standards of their religious forefathers.

When not justifying their social commitments and their ministries to other black intellectuals, black mainline Protestants were forging and maintaining social and theological ties with other white Protestant denominations in America to benefit African American social and political progress. Howard University scholar Kelly Miller (1863-1939) maintained that “[t]he Christian ministry offers the best field for the outlet of Negro capacity and genius,” and he saw the prospect of the modern theologies gaining prominence among white seminarians also enticing a younger generation of educated African Americans to become religious race professionals: “The theological opinion of the world is becoming more and more liberalized. The college man need no longer hesitate concerning the ministry because of old theological exactions which compromised his intellectual integrity.” Miller charged African American colleges with “infus[ing] into the rising generation of educated youth the wisdom and necessity of dedicating their lives to the great task of moral and spiritual leadership, in the name of God, humanity and race.” \(^{30}\) In the 1920s, the National Baptist Convention, USA Inc.’s newspaper *The National Baptist Voice* reprinted editorials from the white liberal Presbyterian magazine *Christian Work*. \(^{31}\) In 1921, a piece titled “The Evil Heart of Unbelief” argued not only that unbelief was relative to different religious traditions (“To Mohammedans, Buddhists and

\(^{29}\) William J. Walls, “How long should a minister stay in school?” *The Star of Zion*, November 10, 1921, 4.


Christians are unbelievers; to Christians, non-Christians are unbelievers”), but that skepticism was inherent to evolving religious beliefs:

Belief here is the acceptance of certain specific tenets. The moment these appear to be untrue or unreasonable to a man he is at once to those who hold them an unbeliever. Thru unbelief of this kind, all progress has come; every progressive must be more or less an unbeliever in the status quo; certain abandonments must always be made at every stage of an onward movement. Wycliffe, Luther, Paul, and Jesus were all great unbelievers by the religious standards of their own time, and through their unbelief came enlargement and salvation. Such belief is only faith in larger truth.

The “evil heart” of such unbelief, however, was humanity’s potential “desire to get rid of any sense of supreme rulership in the universe, to deny the existence of a universal moral order that should be obeyed, to get rid of the feeling of duty and obligation to a higher will than our own, and to live without regulative principles.”32 An attachment to belief in a supreme being and its systems of morality resonated in a different manner with The National Baptist Voice’s editors, for it afforded modern justificatory language for their commitment to addressing the perceived immorality among African Americans. The author contended that the concept of sin persisted because of humanity’s behaviors and despite the plausibility of new evolutionary knowledge.33 This stood alongside other articles that year, such as S. N. Vass’s “Is There A Burning Hell,”

32 The article’s author persuaded the reader to scrutinize all religious tenets, certain that a universal morality withstands such examination: “Whatever the risk, I claim for every man the sacred right of asking questions and of exploring the foundations of unbelief however sacred and however old, there must be no sphere artificially shielded from the investigator. There is no doubt that an admission of the evolutionary view of life gives new point to such questions as, What is sin? What is freedom? What is conscience? What is morality? What is religion? I do not propose to discuss these questions now, but only to say that no well-informed theory of evolution, no well-established science, diminishes by one iota our obligation to be and to do the very highest and best that we possibly can be and do.” “The Evil Heart of Unbelief,” The Christian Worker, reprinted in The National Baptist Voice, January 29, 1921, 9, 12.
33 The author stated further, “Personally I have long recognized that the framework of orthodox theology has been damaged beyond repair by the arrival of new knowledge. It is impossible for educated men to believe that the human race began its career with two perfect human beings, or with any number of perfect human beings, and the whole scheme of redemption based upon that supposition, so far as its formal doctrines are concerned, is undermined. But this does not mean that sin is not a fact in human life and that the greatest need of man is to be saved from it, and that we can only be so saved by the living God.” “The Evil Heart of Unbelief,” 12.
which affirmed the absence of such a fiery destination in the Hebrew Bible but promised its fate for unredeemed sinners according to Jesus’ words in New Testament passages. Vass, an African American educator, minister, and district secretary of the American Baptist Publication Society, framed biblical scholarship to afford black Baptists a conservative evangelical foundation to continue preaching against personal immorality in concert with their white Baptist contemporaries. Another 1921 article, titled “Negroes to Pray that God Trouble the Conscience of White America,” announced a call from NAACP to “colored ministers throughout the United States” to use Sunday, April 24 to preach “Justice to the Negro—the Test of Christianity in America” sermons, which the ministers were to follow with an offering of prayer, in support of the civil rights organization’s membership drive.

Later in the decade, The Star of Zion editor Rev. William H. Davenport (1868-1936), who assumed the position following Walls’s promotion to bishop, echoed his dependence on a concept of “supreme rulership” as he voiced his support for evolutionary theory. Davenport endorsed a concept of theistic evolution in response to a World Evangel parody of the Psalm 23 prayer, which contained evolution as its object of reverence: “Evolution should not be treated in such a jaundiced vein with so much irony and mockery. To our mind, evolution is a serious fact; so serious that raillery and buffoonery can not discredit it. As the world grows older and men think more clearly[,] the supposed chasm between evolution and religion is bridged, and no one is injured thereby.”

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36 “A Psalm of the Evolutionist,” The Star of Zion, October 28, 1926, 4. The Christian Century lauded Davenport’s defense of evolutionary theory: “It will be remembered that North Carolina, in which this paper is published, is
Tennessee’s Scopes trial, AMEZ Bishop E. D. W. Jones addressed the NAACP’s 22nd Annual Conference in Pittsburgh in 1931, declaring that African Americans were “as far removed from the Scopes trial in Tennessee and the religious and educational enactments of legislatures against evolution and discoveries of science as the enlightened Englishman is far removed from the cave man.” The more pressing matter, for Jones, was to address white Americans’ “Christianity of injustice, prejudice, hate, cold indifferent brotherhood, war, slaughter and armed missionary invasion” that was morally deficient in comparison to “the Christianity of the Negro.”

In 1925, the *Africo-American Presbyterian* reprinted an article celebrating the gathering of 15,000 people in New York City’s Madison Square Garden to launch a drive to raise $15 million for the Episcopal Cathedral of St. John the Divine—a congregation that later became a prominent host for sacred jazz music—in addition to lauding the weekly popularity of several New York pastors. The article claimed that “the alarm raised by radical ministers of the Gospel, that the country, led by the younger generation, has cast religion definitely in the discard” was unwarranted in light of this evidence of modern religious vitality. Similarly, the announcement from the University of Michigan that it intended to found the Michigan School of Religion for comparative religious studies provided enough evidence that “[t]here is life in the old truth yet, but each age requires its restatement in valid and comprehensible terms.”

adjacent to the state of Tennessee; and that the Negro race is supposed by some to be intellectually inferior and backward.” See “Negro Editor Speaks a Kind Word for Evolution,” *The Christian Century*, reprinted in *The Star of Zion*, November 25, 1926, 5.

37 “Anti-Evolutionists Lag Behind Negroes Declares Bishop Jones In Pittsburgh,” *The Star of Zion*, July 9, 1931, 4. Jones also resonated with black intellectuals and Social Gospel proponents who criticized African American Protestants for focusing on the hereafter and neglecting commitments to social and political change in America by declaring his (and his denomination’s) concept of a “heaven” that had evolved beyond the heaven of enslaved generations of African Americans seeking eternal deliverance from earthly oppression: “Heaven and a desire to get there…grew out of our hellish condition from inhumane tortures we hoped to be relieved from. But now our heaven is in service, duty, fighting for fellowship, manhood, honest courageous citizenship, right acting toward one another, reverence for personality.”

38 Of the Michigan School of Religion, the article stated, “This institution is nonsectarian in its point of view and established on the belief that ‘the facts of life and the world, as they come to be known and appreciated, instead of
white Presbyterians, religion was “[w]orking its way slowly and tortuously out of the concepts and definitions untenable in the light of science” and “press[ing] on to new concepts and definitions which shall satisfy the ever-hungry soul of the man in the new order.”

Similarly, progressive ministers hoped to foster interracial ties in the 1920s by taking initial, symbolic steps like exchanging pulpits on Abraham Lincoln’s birthday. The Chicago Church Federation’s race relations committee arranged for such exchanges for a sequence of Sundays in 1925, including having Dr. Robert Clements, white pastor of Austin’s First Presbyterian Church, exchange pulpits with Dr. W. Edward Williams, black pastor of Chicago’s Hope Presbyterian Church.

Among AMEZ ministers, there was also promise in the early years of the decade to articulate religious tolerance that paralleled white ministers and academics long invested in comparative religious appreciation of different traditions—although ultimately claiming Christianity’s relative religious superiority. A minister in the Methodist Conference of Detroit preached that “no man or woman who is sincerely trying to find God should refer to another’s religion as false,” and if other religions are inadequate, “in each are found persons who are conscientious of their belief.” The Star of Zion affirmed this sentiment, calling it “the true spirit of Christian love and tolerance” and positing an ideal world benefitting from worshippers truly committed to their ancestral traditions or the new religions they embraced.

The paper betraying its spiritual values, can only enhance these, and that Christianity itself, like any other religion even greater in its spirit and purpose than in its letter, can only gain as it studies other religions sympathetically and responds honestly to new knowledge about men and things.”

“Religious Signs of the Times,” The Independent, reprinted in The Afro-American Presbyterian, Feb 19, 1925, 2. It is important to note, however, that an embrace of modernism did not capture the entire Presbyterian church, and a few months later the denomination approached a General Assembly meeting contesting the place of fundamentalists, modernists and rationalists, and moderates. See “Facing the Issue,” The Presbyterian, reprinted in The Afro-American Presbyterian, May 14, 1925, 2.

This article also states that Dr. J. H. Carstens, white pastor of the Austin Baptist Church, exchanged pulpits with Rev. F. S. Maliney, pastor of Chicago’s Wayman African Methodist Episcopal Church. “White and Negro Pastors Exchange,” The Afro-American Presbyterian, Mar 5, 1925, 2.

The article stated, “It were better for the world if the followers of one sect or creed would permit other sects and creeds go on their way worshipping God according to the forms that their mothers and fathers followed, or that were
maintained that this sentiment existed among the leading clergy in the 1930s, summarizing Bishop Cameron Chesterfield Alleyne’s ecumenical stance and praise for Mohandas K. Gandhi when he presided over an AMEZ conference in 1938: “One man’s religion, whether it be Hindu, Mohammedanism [sic] or Christianity, was as good as another man’s, if it disciplined his life and produced good character. [Alleyne] paid tribute to Mahatma Gandhi and when he did so his colleagues cried shame at him. But whether Gandhi worshipped a cow or any other thing, he prayed that the world would have more Gandhis.”

And as African American social and religious leaders focused on British India as a model for anticolonial resistance, leaders like Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore—with the former regarded as a modern religious and political exemplar for his race—produced discourses of Christianity that resonated with the Protestant Christianities that an oppressed American racial minority both embraced and forged. When the poet Tagore addressed an English missionary by letter, he wrote, “Do not be always trying to preach your doctrine, but give yourself in love. Your western mind is too much obsessed with the idea of conquest. Your inveterate habit of proselytism is another form of it. Christ never preached himself, or any dogma or doctrine. He preached the love of God.” This letter circulated in several black and white Protestant publications, and *The Star of Zion*’s editorial response declared, “Tagore strikes the conceit out of the English imperialistic Christian and calls him to his need in this letter. It will help us all to read this from a Mohammedan to see what to others we are seen to be.” In their work to forge a common worldview with white Protestants, black Protestants shared a missionary project that

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42 “Bishop Alleyne at the AME Zion Church,” *The Star of Zion*, January 20, 1938, 7.
they qualified, however, with a recognition of the ever-present prospect of conversions serving larger colonizing projects.\textsuperscript{44}

The black religious press also captured the social and political activism of denominational leaders. Rev. George Frazier Miller, African American rector of Brooklyn’s St. Augustine’s Protestant Episcopal Church, socialist, founding member of the Niagara Movement, and president of the National Equal Rights League urged African American Protestants “to adopt incessant individual prayer and group prayer as a measure of relief from proscription” in addition to pursuing “independent voting for men and measures, union of all kinds of race bodies to use the political and economical resources to compel relief from segregation, disfranchisement, lynching and proscription, [and] membership in one or more civil rights organizations.”\textsuperscript{45} Miller even composed a “Race Prayer” for African American Protestant churches and individuals to model “in their devotion on Thanksgiving Day, or other days of prayer and religious devotions[].”\textsuperscript{46}

Additionally, the black religious press frequently highlighted the work of white religious allies in the fight against racial violence. One white Protestant ally was the Presbyterian Rev. James Myers, Industrial Relations Secretary of the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America. In 1934, Myers composed a “Penitential Prayer for the Sin of Lynching” in his book,

\textsuperscript{44} A 1927 \textit{Star of Zion} editorial, under the direction of Rev. William Henry Davenport, reminded readers that “the bayonets of the Western powers have followed the Bible.” Therefore, the suspicion of “Western Christianity” by non-Western peoples was not a surprise to black Christians who had experienced its oppressive racial consequences: “It is stated that wherever Western Christianity has penetrated, racial experiences, racial culture and nationalism have been suppressed or superseded by the indoctrination of foreign ideas and methods. The exclusiveness, the superiority complex of the missionary has stirred up nationalistic prejudices, and instigated anti-Christian resistance in China, Japan, India; and there are mutterings in Africa. A different attitude must be adopted if the missionary is to carry on effective work for Christ. Mankind, the world over, combats assumptions of superiority.” “Why the Anti Christian Fight,” \textit{The Star of Zion}, April 07, 1927, 4.
\textsuperscript{46} See “November Twenty-Fifth As Prayer Day. Entire Race Urged to Adopt Prayer Relief from Oppression—President of League Offers a Form of Prayer for Nation Wide Use,” \textit{The Afroco-American Presbyterian}, Nov 18, 1926, 4.
Prayers for Self and Society. The Star of Zion welcomed any opportunity to promote white Christian voices in opposition to the nation’s lynching crisis, and the paper reprinted the text of Myers’s prayer for its audience.

Edwin Mims, a Vanderbilt University English professor, anti-lynching advocate, and Methodist, was another white Protestant ally whom African American Protestants granted the authority to lecture their race on the proper path toward social progress. Speaking at Tuskegee Institute’s annual “Founder’s Day” celebration, Mims recalled the life of Booker T. Washington as exemplary for the African American student audience while also offering maxims for them to safeguard African American culture in the tumultuous jazz age: “We need your Spirituals, but not your jazz; your faith, but not your superstition. Let your humor remain as a fountain of innocent joy rather than cesspool of vulgarity. Let the school and the church retain your fealty rather than the cabaret. Let the rhythm of your souls be the music of the spheres and not the tomton of the orgy.”

The following section details black Protestant reactions to the dancing habits of these professionally-oriented black youth, a concern the religious leaders shared throughout the 1920s and 1930s with many of their white religious allies like Mims.

Dancing in the Dark: Religion Versus Recreation

Religious race professionals also considered the fate of their Protestant congregations and denominations in light of the encounters with dancing they shared with their white religious counterparts. In 1921, The Star of Zion quoted Reform Rabbi Davi Philipson of the Rockdale Avenue Temple in Cincinnati on the problem of dancing: “Dance halls are crowded with the

48 See “Penitential Prayer For The Sin of Lynching,” The Star of Zion, February 22, 1934, 1.
youth of both sexes; churches rarely see them. If the churches and their leaders are wise they will attack this most pressing problem and bring to bear upon its solution every resource at their disposal.”50 “The Fight Looming on Dancing” was *The Star of Zion* editor Walls’s discussion in 1924 of the backlash at Brooklyn’s St. Mark’s Congregational Church, a white congregation whose pastor, the Rev. Charles W. Dane, banned the continued use of the church basement for dancing as social recreation:

A revolt arose and few of the three hundred young people in his church attended services the following Sunday. Policemen were placed at the door to prevent a rush on the church on the Sabbath. A Sunday School teacher in this church said of the incident, “I feel that dancing in the church edifice will serve to keep our young men and women away from the cabarets and public dance halls which do not furnish the right environment for future deacons and deaconesses.” The pastor stated that it was his experience that church members who danced, seldom found the time to pray.

Walls remarked that the day’s dancing was too promiscuous, and although their churches may have both dancing members and pious members, “we cannot have both at the same time.” Protestantism, in black and white, faced a fight over dancing, and Walls urged Protestants to follow the Catholic parishes who had banned the practice. Dancing was an “insidious evil to society” that threatened Christian piety: “It has lost us influence in this generation until our spirituality is almost paralyzed and our efforts at personal work in soul saving, shut off where we have a right most to expect positive and active assistance.” Walls even deemed African American Protestant clergy as especially culpable for losing authority over their parishioners.51

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However sympathetic the non-religious black press was to the anti-dancing cause of religious press editors, they reported on and engaged the opinions of black denominations in ways that reinforced and questioned these religious writers’ standing as race representatives. The *New York Age* editors responded to the “prophetic editor of the *Star of Zion*” by questioning the effect of wholesale condemnation that only pushed black youth further away from church adherence and attendance:

> The trouble with such denunciations of dancing as conducted today is that the critics do not suggest a way to eliminate the evils and preserve the good features that may be found in dancing as an exercise and a diversion. The only effect of such sweeping denunciation and banning of dancing by church members is to drive many young people out of the church. A better way must be found to deal with this question of dancing.⁵²

Walls responded to the *New York Age* by pointing them to previous *Star of Zion* editions where he advocated that churches must open their doors to “…clubs, boy scouts, camp fire girls, Sunday School athletic groups, healthy games, indoor for winter and outdoor for summer, for both old and young, but separate” to supplant the pursuit of worldly dancing. These recreational opportunities were to exist alongside churches’ administration of “employment bureaus and classes to teach public conduct and every sort of organization to help save our earnings and extend ourselves into co-operative business, community protection, [and] education and religion.” By doing so, churches would be able to fulfill the task of “directing the play of all the people, both young and old, that their lives will count for the most in carrying on the work of the kingdom of God.” As black Protestant denominations expanded in the urban North, Walls and many other black Protestant ministers took this task seriously, and he urged that they must “take over the recreation work or lose thousands of our group who wind their ways into this bustling,

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⁵² “Comments By The Age Editors On Sayings of Other Editors,” *New York Age*, April 5, 1924, 4.
congested Yankee civilization.” For their part, the New York Age editors responded to Walls by affirming “the broadening attitude of the church and authorities on the question of rational and proper recreation for the people. The increased consideration given to vital questions of community welfare by such established religious organs as the Star of Zion and the [AME] Christian Recorder is a hopeful sign of the times.” The New York Age editors anticipated that these religious papers’ editors “may yet devise a way to take the danger out of dancing,” a step beyond the recent example of forty white Methodist bishops who recommended “the removal of the ban against dancing and other prohibited amusements.”

To provide recreational alternatives to dancing, some African American Protestants turned to the stage. The New York World writer Lester A. Walton detailed the work of Mount Olivet Baptist Church pastor William P. Hayes and St. Mark’s Methodist Episcopal Church pastor John W. Robinson, who performed a production of “The Merchant of Venice” and played the roles of Shylock and the Duke of Venice, respectively (see figure 1.1). “Ministers of the gospel, donning sock and bushkin,” wrote Walton, “are convincing overflow audiences that they can act as well as preach[,] can dramatically portray worldly characters as well as pray.”

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53 William J. Walls, “Beg Your Pardon, The Age Errs,” The Star of Zion, April 24, 1924, 4. In this response, Walls referred to his August 9, 1923 editorial, “Church At Play.” Walls also wrote an editorial in January that revealed his disregard for dancing as a racially counterproductive practice. Instead of simply prohibiting “extreme amusements,” churches must “give liberal sanction and direction to sane, safe, clean and physical pastime and games, place dramatic, social and physical organizations in [their] program that will engage and conserve the pent up energies of the youth, while they recreate their bodies and become fitter physically for strong mental work, spiritual growth and practice, and therefore well rounded in character.” For Walls, such work constituted “a whole gospel for the salvation of the individual—body, mind and soul.” See Walls, “Not Dancing, But Recreation in Christian Plan,” The Star of Zion, January 24, 1924, 4.

54 “The Church and Recreation,” New York Age, May 10, 1924, 4. The editors referred to the Methodist Episcopal Church, which had “revoked a decree of fifty-two years standing, placing a ban against its members attending theatres, dances, races, circuses or taking part in other forms of amusement, like card playing.” The editors approved this measure, because they disagreed with “the futility of the church imposing a ban against practices or amusements that are not sinful in themselves, but are made so by undue indulgence or by a perversion of their original intention.” They also regarded this measure as a reasonable response to the younger generation that ignored the ban on amusements, for it now left “the question of amusements to the conscience of the individual.” See “Church Ban on Amusements,” New York Age, June 14, 1924, 4.
than 2,000 persons attended the performance designed “to minimize the public taste for jazz,” and the rest of the cast comprised “members of the various Harlem churches—Protestants and Catholics.” Attending the play cost 75 cents, resulting in the performance becoming “the biggest artistic and financial success in Mount Olivet’s history.” And for Walton, the most interesting aspect of the interdenominational event was its confirmation of a shift away from complete disapprobation of worldly arts: “In years past, many Negroes of the Baptist and Methodist faiths have been superlatively orthodox in their opposition to the theatre. That the two denominations have joined to make war on jazz does not surprise, but for them to walk hand in hand with the theatre and take theatricals seriously is nothing short of revolutionary.”

The play’s production represented a translation of performance skills for both black ministers and local church members, although it was not without dilemma for members who may have hesitated about religious adherents performing “worldly” fictional characters. After the play, according to Walton, some Mount Olive Baptist members “engaged in a friendly discussion as to the propriety of their pastor depicting a character so unlike a minister of the gospel.” They concluded that “for one so reverent to shine so brilliantly as Shylock was a compliment to his histrionic ability,” an acknowledgement that dramatic performance was an essential asset for the black pastor as preacher.55

While African American Protestant ministers debated the appropriateness of one form of entertainment within religious spaces, they also contested other practices within black congregations that blurred the performances of worship and entertainment. For many ministers,

55 “Harlem Church Fights Jazz With Play—Negro Production of ‘Merchant of Venice’ Packs Building,” New York World, June 15, 1930, page unknown; located in the Alexander Gumby Collection of Negroiana; reel 11, vol. 47; Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University. On socially progressive middle-class black church involvement with the “Little Theatre” movement in 1920s New York City, see Prentiss, 28.
these more enthusiastic and charismatic ways of conducting worship and preaching comported with jazz music’s corruption of African American recreation, and they sought to characterize entertaining religious expressions as bearing a jazz tarnish.

**“Jazzing Religion”: Protesting Provocative Protestant Preachers**

As a race church we have been intolerant of all forms of amusement. Still we have gotten lots of amusement out of our religion. Our churches have been the scenes of performances that puzzle and astonish other races, while as a race we have sent all outside amusement to Hades. But we wink at performances ever more ridiculous in the worship and as much corrupt in church society as the vaudeville ever suffered to be so. Witness the holiness bands and some extreme practices of our boasted Protestant Churches.

—William J. Walls, “The Negro Church and the Stage”

Black Protestants faced an uphill battle to capture the approval of the non-religious black press outlets, where religiously-invested individuals often dismissed their ministries as insignificant to combat the contemporary dilemmas of modern life for African Americans. In particular, the black press focused on what they and the black middle-class Protestants regarded as a horde of lecherous black preachers. In a column for the *New York Age*’s “Readers’ Forum” in 1925, AME evangelist Ruth R. Dennis wrote in response to an AME minister’s call for “Holy Ghost Preaching” in African American churches, and she signified this as a call for the “noise” likely characteristic of the Holiness-Pentecostals and rural Baptists. Rather than the absence of

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57 Ruth R. Dennis was affiliated with New York city’s Bethel AME church and regularly appeared on WGBS’s radio station in the late 1920s to discuss biblical topics. She had previously engaged in evangelism and missionary work for a decade, and she was trained at Wilberforce University and completed coursework in theology and classical literature at Columbia University. Dennis also contributed articles to *The Pittsburgh Courier*. See Dennis, “‘Thousands Losing Faith In Church,’ Says Woman Evangelist,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, June 25, 1927, 8; and Dennis, “Babies ‘Too Young To Pray’ Can ‘Shake That Thing’, Says Writer,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, July 30, 1927, 2.
enthusiastic sermonic styles among Methodists, Dennis regarded preachers’ upstanding morality as the great need for black Protestant Christianity:

The ministry of today is regarded as depraved and immoral to the extent that preachers are not respected and in many instances not allowed to enter into the homes of parishioners. I am speaking generally; sensible, thoughtful readers know that if it were not for the few conscientious religious leaders working earnestly this would be a veritable hell on earth. There are some ministers who are led by the Holy Ghost but they are few.

There are others who enter the ministry because it affords them an easy livelihood and oftentimes a rich and popular one. The name of this type is legion. Christ still rebukes them as He did the Pharisees, saying “Well hath Isaiah prophesied of you hypocrites, as it is written, this people honoreth me with their lips but their hearts are far from me.” As lights of the world to be set upon a hill that they may give light to all, these who dare call themselves ambassadors of Christ are as weak morally as a jelly-fish and excuse themselves with the plea that they are only human and therefore not responsible.

Dennis wrote of her attendance at an AME ministers meeting the previous year, where she “appealed to them to do something tangible in bettering conditions” of their parishioners. When one minister retorted that criticisms of preachers must cease because “they are the best God has,” Dennis stated that African Americans were “better off” for “preferring to associate with the worst and remain out of the church[.]” Black Protestants were in need of “a great revival among the ministers” instead of among the people, and “Holy Ghost preaching” would follow the emergence of true “Holy Ghost preachers,” whose ministries would reflect, in Dennis’s words, those of “John the Baptist, John Wesley[.] Whitfield, Moody and others.” “Spirit-filled” preaching was beneath black Methodists, and Dennis regarded these practices as unintelligent, irrational, and regressive in light of the direction in which African American Protestants must now take a modern Christianity.⁵⁸ These enthusiastic practices, coupled with perceptions of

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⁵⁸ Dennis wrote, “Screaming and yelling, jumping up and down like maniacs, and doing all sorts of ridiculous things, which mark the race as ignorant and superstitious, are not evidences of the Holy Ghost. It is not only a disgrace to civilization and twentieth century progress, but also a gross insult to the religion of Jesus Christ. There may be some
preacher immorality, dissuaded those African American physicians, lawyers, and academics who spent their Sundays enjoying modern recreations: “I have heard it said time and again that the most learned of our race, especially the professional people, seem to avoid the church. Of course they should not, but it is not altogether their fault; their intelligence is insulted by all the antics that are perpetuated in the name of religion.” Dennis created distance between lower and higher forms of black Christian expression by comparing these “antics” to “the Indian or African war dance,” with the latter, apparently primitive examples less “ridiculous” than shouting and dancing preachers. The project of a modern black Protestant ministry, for Dennis, was to be in service of the race to “blaze our path upward and onward, intelligently and devoutly,” without “noise” or questionable personal morality.59

In the previous year, The Star of Zion editor Davenport termed this noisy preaching style “whangdoodleism” and blamed its promoters for dissuading educated young African Americans from church attendance: “If we would save to the Church the youth who come out of our schools and college, we must raise the tone of many of our pulpits. Too often when we cannot interest or garner the young, we berate them and education in bitter and vehement language; but voluble vacuity has no charms for the thoughtful.”60 A decade later, AMEZ ministers who opposed emotional religiosity as the authenticator of being “deeply religious” employed the King James versions of James 1:27, Job 16:19, and Job 29:12-16 as the criteria for showing deep religiosity who are so emotional that they must express themselves in some way. That I do not dispute, but this wholesale practice of shouting, peculiar to our people, should be stopped.” Ruth R. Dennis, “‘Holy Ghost Preaching’ Often Styled As ‘Gravy’,” New York Age, March 14, 1925, 4.

59 “‘Holy Ghost Preaching’ Often Styled As ‘Gravy’,” 4.
60 W. H. Davenport, “‘Whangdoodleism’ Must Go,” The Star of Zion, June 19, 1924, 4. The Watchman Examiner, a white Baptist publication, revisited “Whangdoodleism” as a problem in the mid-1930s, defining it as “...a style of preaching and praying which is characterized by the addition of an extra syllable ‘-ah’ to many words. Thus ‘We thank Thee, O Lord-ah, that Thou hast sent us Thy Son-ah, to save us from our sins-ah!’ It is a habit of speech, which is more often used by preachers ‘from the sticks,’ but some urban pulpiteers are not wholly proof against it, especially when emotionally stirred, when their carefully erected inhibitions vanish.” “Whangdoodleism,” The Star of Zion, September 6, 1934, 4.
“in a practical way.” With this selection of biblical verses, these clergymen emphasized Christian social responsibilities over bodily expressions of religious enthusiasm.\textsuperscript{61}

Amusing theatricality and entertainment in black Protestant worship services was a sign of the decadence of the Jazz Age. Black Protestants in the press and pulpits warned of a proliferation of “jazz evangelists” or those who were “jazzing religion,” thereby employing the popular genre’s name as an all-purpose pejorative. In 1930, the \textit{Philadelphia Tribune} warned of “false prophets” who were “willing to desecrate the House of God in order to get the coin of the realm,” replacing “thinking, ideas and ideals” with “the waving of arms and prancing legs” in that pursuit. Expressive worship represented the “antics of jazz vaudeville” which, like popular entertainments, sought “easy money” to reward its “oily-tongued speakers.”\textsuperscript{62}

In 1934, Henry T. McCrary, pastor of Philadelphia’s Tasker Street Baptist Church, wrote of his fondness for jazz music but lamented what he saw as a jazz influence on Christian proselytizing, a practice he termed “Jazz Band Evangelism.” While McCrary confessed that the music “always and invariably makes me feel like dancing, in spite of my religion and the fact that I am a Baptist preacher,” he surmised that “…jazz has become too prevalent in our religious services, especially in our evangelistic endeavors.” Traveling revivalists were responsible for promoting such Jazz Band Evangelism; however, McCary blamed church pastors for “allow[ing] their churches to drift along in a rut of spiritual inactivity” because they had not

\textsuperscript{61} The editorial read, “The definition of religion in which I believe is contained in The Book, ‘Pure Religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this; To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.’ In these respects ‘My witness is in heaven and my record is on high.’ Furthermore, I hope to be able to say conscientiously with Job: ‘I delivered the poor that cried, and the fatherless, and him that had none to help him. The blessing of him that was ready to perish came upon me: and I caused the widow’s heart to sing for joy. I put on righteousness, and it clothed me: my judgment was as a robe and a diadem. I was eyes to the blind. And feet was I to the lame. I was a father to the poor: and the cause which I knew not I searched out.” See “On Being Deeply Religious,” \textit{The Star of Zion}, July 29, 1937, 4.

remained “alert to [their] soul-saving mission instead of free-wheeling along” until the next evangelist was to hold a revival. Whenever these lackluster churches depended on outside revivalists, their brand of evangelism “must be accompanied by a brass band or a jazz orchestra in order to rejuvenate the half-dead Christians and draw the sinners whom the church can at no other time attract.” McCrary asserted that emotionalism and evangelism were distinct while also decrying “jazz music” and “blues singing” in religious services, likely indicating his opposition to the nascent influence of gospel music and Holiness-Pentecostal worship practices that accompanied southern black migrants entering the urban North’s black churches. In asserting the problem of emotional religion and the use of popular, jazz-like instrumentation, McCrary criticized ministers whose charisma became the source of excitement without dismissing the value of religious emotionality:

In the first place, when people are worked up over jazz in religious services sung and directed by the waltzing and shimmying of some of our 20th Century high powered evangelists, these people are not religiously stirred; they are emotionally animated. They are not God-conscious; they are jazz crazy. I am not signifying that I do not believe in emotional religion; to a certain extent, I do. I think that religion concerns itself with the entire personality of man. But I do not think that emotionalism should be the sole object of our religious worship.

To counter the supporters of emotional religiosity, whom he regarded as “attempt[ing] to justify their ultra-noisy and jazz-band-type of worship by referring to Miriam, David, and others in the Old Testament,” McCrary leaned on higher biblical criticism to situate this interpretation of I Samuel 18:6 in line with the subsequent verse, I Samuel 18:7 (“Saul hath slain his thousands,

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63 McCrary wrote, “I do not believe, however, in jazz music or blues singing in worship services of the church! Even if the jazz be played on the pipe organ, or the blues sung with religious words. I think music should be played where it belongs. I like it there.” Henry T. McCrary, “Much Evangelism Today Seen Akin To Theatrical, Minstrel Show Type,” Philadelphia Tribune, April 26, 1934, 5.

64 “Much Evangelism Today Seen Akin To Theatrical, Minstrel Show Type,” 5.
and David his ten thousands”).

He claimed that such poetic biblical narratives reflected “the early Hebrew’s conception of God” as “a God of War” and that such a conception “was purely in keeping with the ethics and moral standards of that day.” “Since the Hebrew’s idea of God (Yahweh) was that of a military Deity winning battles for His people,” argued McCrary, “his worship and praise to God was often characterized in the same manner in which many of the surrounding heathens expressed their religious feelings toward their gods—in tumultuous shouts—in war songs and dances.” McCrary declared that Jesus offered a theological alternative, “not a God of war, and pillage and wrath; but a God of Love, of Peace, and of Good-will toward all mankind.” He invoked John 4:24 to convey that the worship of Jesus’ God “in Spirit and in truth,” consequently, required a degree of reverence beyond jazz stylings and entertaining theatrics. McCrary concluded with colorful prose that questioned the propriety of popular musical sounds and dances for the reverent worship of God’s presence in eternity:

Music then in the church should be characterized by a spirit of sincere reverence; it should be devotional and sacred. It is the tunes of the soul that lift one from the common and ordinary spheres of life unto the sublime relationship with the Infinite. It should enable one to so integrate his personality as to correlate it with the highest conceptions of the Divine.

Imagine the angels in Heaven playing jazz upon their harps of gold and the four and twenty Elders singing meaningless ditties in ragtime tunes, until Heaven is thrown into a frenzied state of emotional pandemonium. If such be our highest conceptions of the Divine, then: On with jazz until every rheumatic brother and sister in the congregation forget their aching joints and erstwhile lameness, and express their religious ecstasy by snake-hipping and buck-dancing.  

Other mainline black Protestant denominations expressed their reception of contemporary biblical scholarship. For instance, The Star of Zion printed a story discussing the scholarly consensus on the theological evolution of the Hebrew Bible: “Scholars now recognize that the Hebrew people began as polytheists (believers in many gods), then became henotheists (worshippers of a national deity) and finally were converted to monotheism, which teaches that there is one sovereign being, the creator and ruler of the universe. Their great prophets attributed to Him outstanding characteristics of His nature. The author of the book of Jonah completed this conception by setting Him forth as the Father of all men, from whom they derive their indestructible brotherhood. See “World News—The Hebrew People,” The Star of Zion, March 1, 1928, 5.

“Much Evangelism Today Seen Akin To Theatrical, Minstrel Show Type,” 20.
McCrary’s relative appreciation of jazz music, coupled with his disapproval of its use to support emotional worship in black Protestant houses of worship, represented one form of extended response to “jazz evangelism” in the black press. Other black Protestant ministers evidenced less patience for “jazz preaching” and released statements banning various traveling ministers from their collective pulpits. The Ministers Interdenominational Alliance of Camden, New Jersey produced a resolution to repudiate “‘jazz preaching’, religious racketeering and all forms of commercialized religion.” Following a fact-finding committee whose chairman was the Rev. George E. Morris, pastor of Camden’s Kaighn Avenue Baptist Church, this ministerial alliance echoed McCrary’s stance that the Christian New Testament did not directly permit such expressive worship practices:

Racketeer and jazz preachers receive encouragement from many recognized churches. Their appeal is made purely to the sentiment or excited nature of the members of congregations; they do their exploiting from the standpoint of the movies, jazz and minstrelsy. They give the people a false idea of preaching the Gospel, Divine Worship, and of the Christianity of Jesus Christ, for which they can find no example in the New Testament which sets forth sane, straightforward, practical Christly teaching, preaching and living.

Ministers who continued to invite such “false prophets” would lose the Alliance’s recognition of their churches.⁶⁷ Oftentimes these black clergymen singled out popular independent ministers, like Bishop Charles “Daddy” Grace, for their ire. At the AME church’s denominational conference in Philadelphia in May of 1934, Bishop N. W. Williams of the seventh district in South Carolina declared that “[m]issions with spurious bishops like the self-styled ‘Bishop’ Grace are a reflection on the religious development of the race.”⁶⁸ A 1938 article chronicled

Grace’s takeover of 20 West 115th Street—previously the home of Father Divine’s Peace Mission—as the emergence of a house of worship comparable to Harlem’s famous Savoy ballroom. Grace’s House of Prayer for All People made it “hard to tell whether he was attempting to compete with Chick Webb beating it out at the Savoy,” a reference to the ballroom’s famous bandleader, whose group included vocalist Ella Fitzgerald. Grace even intentionally appropriated the fashions of the Swing era’s jazz bands, and the article declared, “The band members’ uniforms, styled from [Earl] Snake Hips Tucker’s famous dance suit, consist of black silk, wide sleeved shirts, white trousers, gold sashes and ties, while the upper bracket soldiers wore helmets, gold-braided green coats and white trousers.” Those who attended Grace’s House of Prayer were in for “an evening packed with swing—and perspiration,” a deceptive musical style which produced dubious bodily evidence of sincere Christian worship, according to black mainline Protestants.69

**Clerical Cultural Critics: Direct Opposition to Jazz**

It is said that the Negro created jazz. If he did so he should be ashamed of it.  
…Jazz has about had its day among thinking people. 
…Experience has shown that this sort of music is exotic. It has this effect on the performers and the auditors….Persons who are concerned with social progress, then, must take steps to restrict jazz and stamp it out as an evil.”

—Carter G. Woodson

In 1933, Woodson penned an editorial in *Philadelphia Tribune*, titled “Jazz Demoralizing, Creators Should Be Ashamed,” where the man considered the “Father of Black History” voiced the sentiments of a generation who found little value in this “exotic” form of youth culture that, unlike African American spirituals, provided no positive political or moral value for a race:

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I have always felt mortified to see Negroes labeling themselves as “Jazz Spreaders” and “Jazz Hounds”. Well might they use the latter term, for I have never seen a group that reminds me more of the “Hell Hounds” described by my spiritual adviser in Virginia when he used to try to frighten me into getting religion at the “Anxious Seat”. The “Jazz Spreaders” have run many a soul into a veritable hell.  

Given its popularity as a music genre in the 1920s and 1930s, many social leaders and academic elites in black and white America considered jazz a moral contagion, capable of rapidly reproducing the decadent habits of a reckless black urban youth. The hours of dedicated practice and repetition required to master the musical art of improvisation, or to perform convincingly the charismatic presence of a lead singer in command of her vocal talents, or to make the swing dancer’s choreography seem effortless and innate did not capture the attention of the genre’s cultural critics. Instead, the presence of jazz music and its cultural practices represented for them the immature social habits of a younger generation. African American youth would be wise to spend leisure time refining the race’s “higher” cultural arts, like African American spirituals (or at least creating new ones). At once, Woodson used this editorial to decry both jazz culture and the more physically emotional aspects of African American Christian culture, represented in a religious leader from his youth preaching a revival sermon to compel persons with the fear of God’s eternal punishment to “get religion” through the embrace of Christianity. Neither the “exotic” jazz music nor the frightful religious tactics of “low-church”

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71 Ingrid Monson writes of seemingly effortless improvisational ability as the result of musicians’ arduous, repetitive study and practice: “Much mystification remains about improvisation as an unmediated expression of emotion and spiritual energy, in part because the very act of performance so effectively disguises the preparation and education of musical intuition that is so much a part of a musician’s life. This is what that obsessive-compulsive activity known as practicing tends to do: both excite the performers with the joy of hearing and drive them through endless cycles of repetition and discovery. The embodied knowledge so cultivated becomes the basis of the ability to perform intuitively and responsively without the conscious overintrusion of intellectual interventions during performance.” See Monson, Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call Out to Jazz and Africa (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 295.
black Protestantism appear to have captured, for Woodson, the sensible dignity and religious fidelity African Americans must represent, as modern subjects, if they were to engage in progressive intellectual, cultural, and ultimately political projects in the United States.

Woodson’s criticisms aligned strongly with the middle-class black Protestants who shared his disdain for “jazz” in the previous decade. Jazz was the music of dancing in the 1920s, and earlier proponents of dancing in these debates sought to differentiate the healthy physical exercise from the immoral music that must require censorship. James G. Bland wrote to *Half-Century Magazine* in 1922 to express his desire to censor jazz for its encouragement of sexual impropriety: “Jazz music appeals to the lowest instincts. The most sober citizen loses some of his dignity when he listens to the moaning, groaning and wailing of a jazz orchestra. And most jazz dances are followed by ‘petting parties,’ joy rides and other orgies.” Dancing, however, was acceptable practice, but Bland believed that “an effort should be made to have better music.”

AMEZ Bishop Thomas Walker Wallace took to his denomination’s paper to respond to an Associated Negro Press report that a German musician sought to ban jazz from Germany because “Negro talent” was responsible for its production. However, Wallace did not rebuke German racial bias and chose, instead, to express offense at the suggestion that jazz represented African American talent:

TALENT! Is not this a travesty? Millions of music-loving Negroes would have this abortive offspring of musical parody driven from the universe of music. Will these same Negroes be accused of denying to talent its production of genius? Now, dear little hare-brained brother, a succession of discordant sounds and a jumble of musical notes in syncopated time is not music nor is the ability to produce such a paroxysm of howls, moans, and groans, talent. Jazz, the Bunny Hug, the Bear Walk, the Shimmy, and all other detestable outrages of the poetry

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of sound and motion are fit companions and are the offspring of the disordered and lust maddened souls of the followers of the hideous ogre of mankind—EVIL.

Like most other African American Protestants, Wallace claimed that African American talent belonged to those who created and sang spirituals, and he listed “Swing Low Sweet Chariot,” “Roll, Jordan, Roll,” “Steal Away to Jesus,” and “Didn’t Ole Pharaoh Get Drowned,” along with the contemporary singers Harry Burleigh and Roland Hayes, as evidence of a refined black musical tradition formed in suffering and representative of steadfast piety. By contrast, “Jazz is but the pitiful parody of heart songs wrung from suffering souls.”

Black Protestants in the print press world also sought to validate the spiritual tradition against jazz’s popular emergence by identifying African diasporic authorities on music, like Nicholas George Julius Ballanta of Sierra Leone, “a man whose job it is to examine the relationship of jazz to the music of [Africa’s] jungle tribes.” Whereas Ballanta agreed that jazz had African roots, he declared that it was not the best modern representative of “a definitely painstaking system rooted in centuries of culture” that constituted African music: “The place where you may look for the real survival of African music in America is not in jazz—that has grown up too much in the western way—but in the ‘coon songs’ of the South. Many of the ‘spirituals’ still heard in the South, too, may also be heard—the identical melody—in the jungles of Africa.”

Religiously-invested individuals in the non-religious black press also made more general and generational criticisms of different religious audiences, when not directly criticizing black Protestant clergy. A 1928 New York Amsterdam News editorial contained a lament that the Jazz

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74 “American Jazz Not African,” The Star of Zion, September 23, 1926, 4. The article noted that Ballanta “…was educated as a musician from the Freetown branch of Durham University and has directed his energies toward the study of the music of Africa’s black people. But for the intervention of England his ancestors would have been brought to America and he would have been born a slave.”
Age youth wanted a “jazz religion”—with this phrase representing the paper’s pejorative summary of a recent conference on religion at Harlem’s St. Philip’s Episcopal Church. The Young People’s Fellowship of St. Philip’s hosted the gathering, with “The Christian Religion—Is It a Sufficient Dynamic for Living in the Modern Day?” as the conference theme. The paper reported that the Fellowship “brought forth many opinions, some for and some against religion. The speeches, when analyzed, were found to deal with the churches rather than with religion itself.” The editorial writer asserted, “The Christian religion is sufficient for this day or any other day, if it is lived up to…The Christian ideal of pure living, high thinking, faithful work and the Golden Rule does not square with today’s ideal of luxurious living, shallow thinking, slipshod work and the Brass Rule.” In responding to the opinions of the church’s youth, however, the editorial revealed that this black mainline Protestant congregation permitted its younger congregants to express their criticisms of religious institutions, likely in the pursuit of reforms to suit St. Philip’s youth who would come to take charge of the church as they matured. Nevertheless, to claim the conference’s discourse represented a preference for “jazz religion” also marked the name of the musical genre as one black mainline Protestant generation’s efficient generalization of a host of different social and moral attitudes among African American Christians.

In 1929, The Star of Zion quoted Bishop Walls lamenting the effects of jazz and leisure on learned African Americans: “I am afraid that some of our educated men and women devote too much time to jazz, the dance, and the auto.” To this concern, the column cautioned that “no people can jazz and dance and auto ride themselves to the top,” framing African American progress as a modern competition. The Star of Zion also suggested that the educated class’s

excessive recreation may become an impediment to a race’s collective advancement as a civilization: “The Negro in play forgets that the Caucasian race had won its way to the top before it took the jazz and the auto. The instructors of our youth might be interested in this phase of our social problems.” The California Voice complemented this sentiment by criticizing educated African Americans as indulging in leisure instead of serving and educating fellow African Americans: “If our graduates would throw off some of their superior complex and devote a little time to uplift and inculcating the higher ideals of this life, how much better the race would be and those benefits would redound to the educated group. Education that does not mean service to humanity is the half-baked product.” Denominational leaders and press writers warned of popular entertainment’s indirect effect upon the broader African American race when the talented tenth put its energy into the pursuit of recreation rather than of uplift.

Lastly, the black Protestant minister’s recourse against jazz entertainment was the artistry of the sermon. By the late 1930s, when “swing” came to be the name for popular jazz music, Reverend Captain D. J. Gilmer penned a sermon that reconstructed swing as a timeless concept representing humanity’s ignorance. The printed sermon afforded Gilmer the opportunity to exercise blunt, preacherly humor against those he considered lost in the sin of swing. Gilmer offered “What is man?” as the divine, timeless, and unanswered question; for the swing era, Gilmer responded to this question by offering a comical anthropology that might strike readers as profane if he preached it aloud:

There is a coined word which has been used to describe man and what he is. This word is spelled “damphul.” When Jesus was being crucified by this “damphul” class of men, these words were spoken about those who were trying to crucify

76 “Bishop Walls on Jazz,” The Star of Zion, February 28, 1929, 5. William H. Ferris echoed this sentiment: “This race of ours is out on a wild spree, believing that all that it needs is autos and jazz and that it can live without God.” See Ferris, “Negro Should Produce Saints and Scholars,” The Star of Zion, January 17, 1929, 1.
77 “Bishop Walls on Jazz,” 5.
him: “Father forgive them for they know not what they do.” No, they did not know then and they don’t know now what they are doing. At the crucifixion of Jesus men passed by as he was hanging on the cross in agony and death and scoffed at him and wagged their heads in rhythm. That was the first “swing” time of the world whose tragedy then may not have been as bad as it is today. “Swing,” no reason, no knowledge, just “Swing.” Yea, today, millions of years since God cried from blank space, “Let there be light,” damphuls are still grappling in the dark swept on by “Swing.”

Swing captured the vicious culture that swallowed modern youth. Gilmer spotted “hundreds of young girls and boys” smoking cigarettes while waiting in line for a swing band’s show, evidence of the age’s decadence. The ignorance of the age was both the entertainment culture and the habits like smoking it promoted, bolstered by cross-promotion between the entertainment and tobacco industries: “The cigarette craze is only ‘Swing,’ and when Miss John Doe declares over the air that cigarettes protect her voice, it is the power of the dollar god behind swing.” Beyond encouraging unhealthy habits, swing was responsible for mob violence, the destruction of homes, and the demise of nations. Swing was “on the throne” while truth was “on the scaffold, or before the firing squad, or in the death house to die.” Gilmer lamented the sight of “young men and girls passing the church on Sundays in the suggestive attitude of wagging their heads at Jesus as the world swings,” ignoring the righteous path God provided them, “swept on,” instead, “by the inanities of swing.”

**Conclusion: Ministers and Musicians**

The enticing lurements of rag, the jazz, and the blues, find in Harlem either their origin or their home. The Negro fun-makers, minstrels, theatricals and songsters thrive nowhere else as in Harlem. The ephemeral joys of Nineveh, Tyre and Babylon, stir the imagination on the lower level of fun and devilish excitation. While this may not constitute a characteristic of our orthodox Heaven yet these things appeal mightily to the imagination. Harlem is the center of the Negro dance, cabaret and night life. Negro art, music and poetry radiate from this center…

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In 1927, George S. Schuyler referenced a few biblical narratives, responding to the “Puritans and other such disagreeable ninnies” discontented with the competition of Harlem’s jazz nightlife by claiming that these entertaining venues did not introduce immortality to the world: “Long before cabarets, dance halls and bootleg emporiums came into being there was sin, iniquity and crime…there was neither institution in the Garden of Eden nor on Mount Ararat. Eve was not a cabaret habitué nor was Adam a bar fly, and from all accounts Ham was perfectly sober when he burst out in gales of laughter after viewing his daddy in the altogether.” Although Schuyler did not grant cabarets and dances halls the same social importance as “the churches, ‘Christian’ associations and various societies for the uplift of this and that,” they were important social assets that counteracted urban, industrial America’s modern alienation by “add[ing] contrast and color to life” and “round[ing] out the humdrum of existence in our canyons of steel, brick and asphalt.” These venues benefitted all individuals who, according to Schuyler, bore varied and complex spiritual and physical needs as mixtures of righteousness and unrighteousness: “Every puritan has some pagan in him, and every pagan conceals a little puritan complex.” Harlem shined as a “civilized community” above other cities for its social offerings to satisfy both impulses, wherein “both churches and cabarets seem to be flourishing side by side, and often with much the same patronage.” Entertainment spaces, unlike race institutions (particularly African American Protestant churches), were far more likely to accomplish racial integration:

One great point in favor of the cabaret and dance hall as social assets is the fact that they do what the church and the social organizations do not do: they afford a meeting place for the individuals of the two races where they can know

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each other on a plane of equality and good-will. In many ways they are more valuable in breaking down racial barriers than all of the whooping of the interracial leagues from one end of the country to the other. People who chat, drink and dance together are not apt to harbor ignorant and unreasonable prejudices, or to indulge in lynching orgies.

The crux of the race problem in this country is getting white and black people to see each other as individuals and not as race representatives. The cabarets and dance halls of Harlem are doing this to a larger extent all of the time, and this, coupled with the joy and gaiety they dispense, certainly marks them as more of a promise than a menace, despite the fervent yawping of our distressing puritans.80

The segregated realities of Harlem’s most popular night clubs contradicted Schuyler’s assertion that blacks and whites were able to “know each other on a plane of equality and good-will.” Nevertheless, Schuyler’s romanticized portrait of Harlem in this column certainly indicates the non-religious black press’s attitude toward popular entertainment—and modern entertainment spaces—in light of its black Protestant opponents. As Martin Summers notes in his study of contested identities of masculinity and manhood in the early decades of the twentieth century, Harlem’s private parties and commercial leisure spaces fostered the mingling of middle-class black youth with working-class African Americans and African Caribbean immigrants.81 As a relative form of racial integration was becoming possible through live jazz entertainment in new urban venues, the emerging generation of potential African American race leaders and representatives were also indulging their jazz tastes in private apartments, thereby challenging the spatial separation that normally served to distinguish “respectable” race representatives from the black working class they desired to lead and represent.

81 Summers elaborates on the relation of private rent parties to the black middle class: “Rent parties, in effect, were the antitheses of middle-class respectability. The fact that porters and seamstresses, workers in the service sector that enjoyed a certain middle-class status, rubbed elbows with teamsters, day-laborers, domestics, pimps, and prostitutes, suggests that modern urban leisure, along with generational change, was eroding the cultural grip of the social conventions of an earlier generation.” See Summers, 175-178.
Meanwhile, the defenders of the race’s religious institutions continued to implore African Americans to revitalize their churches in order to combat white perceptions of African Americans as culturally unfit for contemporary society. When H. L. Mencken charged that African Americans failed to equal whites in the creative fields of art, poetry, and music, Bishop Walls wondered about the lack of response from the black jazz artists’ community to Mencken’s charge that others outside the race were refining their craft: “So far, we have heard no shouting chorus from either these or even from the jazz writers who Mencken says left it for George Gershwin and Paul Whiteman to make a serious matter.” Rather than speak for these popular black artists, Walls argued that the faults of black Protestants rested with preachers and the middle-class populace, with the former more interested in entertaining sermons and the latter more invested in popular entertainments: “We have not kept our vision apace with the present needs and trends…The great majority find that money is most easily culled through the peoples’ emotions. We have scarcely attacked the greater tasks of building a program that will commend itself to the newer and greater demands of the race in his advancing opportunity and complex struggles.” This work required the educated black middle class’s financial and time commitments to create, in Walls’s words, social programs to attract “our high brows,” “our everyday masses,” and the youth.82

Black Protestant mainline ministers soldiered on as the race’s representatives throughout the 1930s. One milestone achievement for this group came with the effort of Rev. Glenn. T. Settle, pastor of Cleveland’s Gethsemane Baptist Church, to produce “The National Negro Hour” for broadcast over 107 CBS radio stations. Establishing the broadcast involved the efforts of

82 “Our Sensitive Negro Ministry,” The Star of Zion, August 4, 1927, 1, 5.
“the National Baptist Conventions, The AME Church, The AMEZ Church, The CME Church, The ME Church (colored), The Negro Press, the outstanding Negro educators and schools of the nation, the Negro business and professional organizations, not to forget the Negro welfare and social workers and the various college fraternities of the nation…” The program launched the career of the Wings Over Jordan Choir, and the promotion in the black religious press emphasized its intention to counteract other popular narratives and representatives of African Americans: “The feature of the program is a message delivered on each program by some prominent Negro character revealing to the nation The Better Side of Negro Life. The speaker to be used on the program will join the chain during broadcast from their own city. This system is a guarantee that the most prominent people of our race will be heard as guest speakers.” This national structure ensured for middle-class black Protestants a stronger vehicle for combating the popularity of jazz musicians, showcasing local race representatives in ministry, education, publishing, and law while providing their own entertaining musical traditions to black and white radio audiences.  

As cultural critics, these religious race professionals marshalled their denominational papers and allies in the black press against the powerful, popular songs and dances that a wayward generation of African Americans was forging in the 1920s and 1930s. As the music grew in popularity, the ministers saw it both as a cause to lead black youth and emerging black professionals away from institutional religious commitments as well as a symptom of gratuitous emotionality and materialism, a wider social epidemic with a particular infection and corruption of modern black Protestant worship and preaching. Church associations, conventions, and religious radio programming served as venues to preach against the emerging jazz and swing

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cultures; wholesome recreation and an educated black ministry that spoke for African Americans on pressing social and political matters also represented practical tools of combat. These middle-class black ministers sought to reform ministerial professions and the mission of Protestant churches as they faced criticisms from black intellectual elites, the black press, white cultural critics, and the very black youth their work targeted as they also sought the investments of black professionals in their local congregations and wider denominations. Additionally, the ministers articulated modern theologies to maintain interracial religious conversations as well as to provide racialized critiques of a white American Protestantism that sanctioned Jim Crow violence and segregation. To remain prominent race representatives, these religious race professionals balanced a progressive religious engagement with society and a critical religious discourse of popular culture. But as Rev. T. J. Jefferson’s 1930 letter to The Star of Zion noted, “The preacher no longer monopolizes the privileges of the public speech.”

The emerging African American generation’s attachments to popular music, dancing, and urban night life raised the question of whether the sounds of jazz as an art form drowned out the voices of these religious race professionals. The following chapter discusses Cab Calloway, a black male musician who emerged from the modern religious world these middle-class black Protestants created in the 1920s. Calloway elected not to follow their path toward sanctioned race professionalism and became, instead, a dancer-singer-composer-bandleader-entertainer whose comical jazz music often addressed African American Protestantism. But because of his celebrity, the responsibility of race representation appeared to follow him throughout his early career.

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84 T. J. Jefferson, “Can the preacher be saved?” The Star of Zion, October 9, 1930, 8.
Chapter Two

“Keep that Hi-De-Ho in Your Soul”: Religious Irreverence through Preacherly Parody

Figure 2.1. “—and remember, none of that hi de ho stuff!” *Esquire Magazine*, October 1934, 31. Cartoon by E. Simms Campbell.
Introduction

A musical call and response between brass and reeds opens the 1933 composition, “Harlem Camp Meeting.” A voice asks, “What’s this comin’ off here?” and after a brief pause, reflects, “It’s more like one of them good ol’ revival days here. A camp meeting! Yowza, yowza!” Next comes a clarinet solo, and the inquiring voice assumes the role of a narrator in remarking, “There’s a dear brother got happy on that clarinet, look at him. Greeeat day!” As the clarinet solo continues, the narrator interjects affirmative responses: “Tell me all about it, brother. Tell me all about it, now.” The narrator then refers to the “brother” as “son” and tells him to “Get ready for this scat sermon I’m gonna give you here.” The narrator produces a wordless vocal melody, accompanied by syncopated chimes replicating the sound of distant Sunday church bells. Another “brother” follows his vocal solo with a muted trumpet solo, and he encourages this man to “get happy there, get happy” with responses of “uh huh,” “yowza!” and “Shout it, Elder, shout it, Elder.” To this musical crowd, the narrator proclaims, “Get happy, get happy, all you sinners, and get happy here!” The percussion halts for a brass interlude, before the beat resumes with an antiphonal chorus of clarinet “sisters” swinging with brass “brothers.”

As the music climaxes, the narrator joyously proclaims with laughter, “This is the kind of camp meetins we have in Harlem, yeah, man!” Composed for Cab Calloway and His Orchestra by the African American trombonist Harry White in 1933, “Harlem Camp Meeting” takes the listener on a tour of the exciting sounds of a black Protestant revival setting. The key sonic distinctions from a traditional black Christian worship experience, however, are the song’s instrumental “testimonies,” “yowza” exclamations, and the presence of the swinging sounds of a
Harlem big band as the product.¹ Urging participants to “get happy,” or recognizing a clarinetist who got happy on his instrument, evokes the charismatic Christian practice of shouting, crying, and dancing under the possessive influence of the Holy Spirit—but these participants are to be happy as “sinners.” The narrator speaks back to the soloists who provide their musical testimonies, behaving as a church member who vocally affirms the righteous speech of her or his sisters and brothers in Christ. In this three-minute recording, the African American singer, dancer, composer, and bandleader Cabell “Cab” Calloway, III (1907-1994) shifts rapidly from observer to interpreter to practitioner. And his ascendancy to revival preacher comes with a “scat sermon” in the middle of the song.²

This forty second scat interlude is most interesting, for with it Calloway produces a rhythmic and melodic imitation of the “whooped” portion of African American “chanted sermons.”³ The “chanted sermon,” according to historian of African American religions Albert Raboteau, originated in the rural South’s revivals and prayer meetings, spreading into urban areas through the United States with African American migrations in the twentieth century.

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¹ Calloway biographer Alyn Shipton details the arrangement of “Harlem Camp Meeting” to respond to the criticism by the jazz composer, musician, and author Gunther Schuller that Calloway’s orchestra lacked competent soloist features to rival other major swing orchestras: “…[A]part from a few spoken comments, Cab’s contribution is what he calls a ‘scat sermon’—an entirely wordless vocal functioning as an instrumental solo between choruses from Arville Harris on clarinet, Ed Swayze on growling muted trumpet, and Bennie Payne on piano. The solo space for his instrumentalists is generous, and there’s also a well-crafted ensemble opening chorus for the reeds accompanied by stabbing brass, and later for a [Fletcher] Henderson style clarinet trio. The rhythm section pushes everything along with verve and élan, with [Al] Morgan’s bass easily outswinging the work of his hometown counterparts Pops Foster with [Louis] Armstrong and [Wellman] Braud with [Duke] Ellington. This recording totally refutes what Schuller characterizes as ‘the prevailing view that Calloway was merely a novelty singer, given to “hollering” and “braying” [whose] orchestra is no more than a functional band relegated to second-rank accompanimental status.’” Alyn Shipton, Hi-De-Ho: The Life of Cab Calloway (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 80.

² Author’s transcription. From Cab Calloway and His Orchestra, “Harlem Camp Meeting,” The Chronological Cab Calloway, Volume 1: The Early Years, 1930-1934, © 2001, 1933 by JSP Records, JSP908, Compact disc.

³ According to Martha Simmons, “Whooping is first melody, one that can be identified by the fact that its pitches are logically connected and have prescribed, punctuated rhythms that require certain modulations of the voice, and is often delineated by quasi-metrical phrasings.” See Simmons, “Whooping: The Musicality of African American Preaching Past and Present,” in Preaching with Sacred Fire: An Anthology of African American Sermons, 1750 to the Present, Martha Simmons and Frank A. Thomas, eds. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2010), 865.
Calloway was familiar with the form, despite having attended more elite middle-class African American churches in his youth, because the chanted preaching style as oral “folk” art was, according to Raboteau, a “tradition of preaching [that] remain[ed] popular among literate and ‘sophisticated’ congregations.” The chanted sermon contains three movements. The first contains conversational prose that is “occasionally grandiloquent.” The preacher then enters the “whooped” or “chanting” portion by speaking more rapidly, excitedly, and rhythmically. The third movement represents the sermon’s climax, wherein the preacher’s chanting “becomes tonal and merges with the singing, clapping, and shouting of the congregation.” Raboteau details the chanting preacher’s musical performance of a sermon “…compos[ed] on the spot” and “delivered in rhythmic metrical speech”:

The meter is not based on accent but on time, the length of time between regular beats. As the preacher moves into the chanted section of his sermon, he fits his speech to a beat. When necessary, he lengthens vowels or rushes together words in order to make a line match the meter. The regularity of the beat is accentuated by the preacher’s gasp for air at the end of each line. Sometimes he actually raps out the rhythm on the pulpit. The congregational responses…reinforce the beat and simultaneously fill in the space left by the preacher’s pause for breath.

…At a certain stage, the preacher’s chanting takes on a musical tone, which indicates a concomitant rise in emotional pitch. The preacher’s voice changes: the timbre becomes harsh, almost hoarse. His vocal cords are constricted; his breathing is labored. All the while he moves, gestures, dances, speaking with body as well as voice.”

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4 Further, Raboteau writes of the chanted sermon as a cultural experience and event in African American life, like “spirituals, gospel, blues, and tales. Like these other forms of oral literature, the sermon has served as a source of information, advice, wisdom, and, not least, sheer enjoyment for generations of black Americans. This sermonic style has spread outside the pulpit to influence public speaking and singing styles in the secular sphere.” The preacher, as sermonic artist, “earns critical recognition not by introducing something new, but by performing the old with skill, fluency, spontaneity, and intensity. Style of delivery determines the success of the oral performer whether bluesman, gospel singer, or preacher.” See Albert J. Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African-American Religious History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 141-142.
5 Raboteau, 143-144. Raboteau adds that African American preachers have often returned to conversational prose following these three movements.
6 Raboteau, 144.
Calloway’s “growling” portion (from 1:28-1:35) most exemplifies the monotone chanting sound when the preacher’s gasps for breath are audible, with the shouts near its beginning emphasizing his rising emotional pitch, and the moans representing the shouted singing that many preachers—by this point displaying their physical exhaustion—use to conclude their sermons.

With this song, the musicians and composers intended to produce a hilarious and familiar representation of black Protestant religious practice. Unlike the chanted African American Christian sermon, however, Calloway’s scatted message celebrates the jazz man’s existence: a recreational life that is at times sexual, inebriated, and raucous. And as a nocturnal life on the weekends that resulted in partiers sleeping late on Sundays, Harlem’s “camp meetings” were always in conflict with observing the Christian Sabbath.

As a bandleader, flamboyant conductor, composer, singer, and dancer, Calloway often crafted and inhabited the identity of a pastoral figure against the backdrop of New York’s Cotton Club—itself a representation of a particular romantic pastoral image, namely, the antebellum Southern slave mansion and plantation. Note, however, that the visual scene itself was not accessible to most African Americans, barred from the Cotton Club due to its segregated policy. If not the owners of radios, most African Americans encountered Cab Calloway’s jazz through phonograph records, thereby accessing the sounds of his artistry absent the obvious racist professional context in which whites consumed his performances. In the Great Depression era, the “hi de ho man” was the entertaining showman with a popular reputation for bearing a jubilant, often irreverent musical message for partying club patrons and for radio or phonograph listeners to partake in his celebration in their homes (see figure 2.1).

Charles Hiroshi Garrett employs a Freudian analysis of Calloway’s worth to audiences as allowing them to “let go of their cares” during the Great Depression: “In addition to creating a sense of intimacy through shared experience, Calloway’s humor also enabled his audiences to engage with dangerous topics while keeping them at arm’s length,
as the “Satanic Sultan of Scat Singing” by writer and New York Amsterdam News journalist Vincent L. “Roi” Ottley, employed irreverent humor to offer a clear alternative to religious calls for a return to “old time” African American Christianity that traded on expressions of “low church” religiosity.8

This chapter examines Cab Calloway and his music to articulate and portray irreverence as an interpretive concept for understanding a particular mode or register of religious skepticism in African American religious history. In the pursuit of language to capture the peculiar character of religious skepticism in African American culture, historians overlook the formidable presence of comedy lampooning African American religious life by African American men and women familiar with the subject matter. To speak of the broader twentieth century, African American music, film, television, plays, literary works, stand-up specials, and radio/television sketch actors have created a comedic tradition wherein religious subjects elicit a “knowing” laughter among African American audiences and others familiar with these irreverent types of characters through their own religious experiences and associations. Producing this laughter is ultimately in the service of fashioning a personal or communal orientation toward religious affiliation and participation that appreciates humor about the ostensibly sacred, somber, and serious.

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negotiating with and letting off steam in the Freudian sense. Taking advantage of his dramatic delivery and theatrical flair, Calloway recorded the song ‘Minnie the Moocher’ and a series of equally irreverent spin-offs that catalogued the illicit behavior of Minnie and her friend Smokey Joe, including their misadventures with cocaine, opium, and marijuana. Alternative verses that mixed humor and intrigue with Calloway’s amusing scat choruses, [his songs] encouraged listeners to join in a communal call and response…and thus lend approval to Calloway’s act and participate in the fun. In addition to building an active audience, his musical humor can be seen as an attempt to distinguish between insiders and outsiders, establishing an in-crowd of listeners who were keen to enlist in Calloway’s creative bedlam.” See Garrett, Ch. 1, “The Humor of Jazz,” in Jazz/Not Jazz: The Music and Its Boundaries, David Ake, Charles Hiroshi Garrett, and Daniel Goldmark, eds. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2012), 59-60. Garrett’s last point on constructing an in-crowd is most compelling when considering Calloway’s deployment of African American religious tropes in forging irreverent musical humor.
Through humor, irreverence provides an orientation towards religious affiliation that is distinct from radical, humanist critiques of African American Protestant Christian theology and practice. Agnostic, atheist, or theologically liberal African American playwrights produced such critical works in the interwar era, whose dramatic scenes and characters presented an explicit engagement with the theological reasoning these playwrights believed enabled their race’s suffering in Jim Crow America. In Cab Calloway’s early career, by contrast, he made a concerted effort to produce humorous irreverence by replicating the sights, sounds, and behaviors of black Protestant church settings, characters, events, and experiences.

Accordingly, the chapter begins by identifying the young Calloway’s tensions with his respectable middle-class African American roots and religious upbringing, as presented in his 1976 autobiography, *Of Minnie the Moocher & Me*. The chapter then explores religious and racial irreverence by examining several Calloway musical performances in addition to “Harlem Camp Meeting”: “Is That Religion?” “Miss Hallelujah Brown,” “A Strictly Cullud Affair,” and “Yaller” on record; and “St. James Infirmary” in an animated short. Next, I examine Calloway’s emergence as a de facto race representative, first through the ambivalence of religious irreverence with his performance in the 1936 feature film *The Singing Kid*, then through his perspectives on racial representation as an established musician. The chapter concludes with a discussion of Calloway’s irreverent legacy in black Protestant popular culture.

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Respectable Roots, Sabbath Sacrilege

Against the wishes of his middle-class black parents, Cabell Calloway III pursued the life of a popular entertainer in the art form of jazz, which they considered beneath their son. His mother, Martha Eulalia Reed, was a graduate of Morgan State College who worked as a public school teacher. She was also a church organist who ensured that her children occupied their Sunday youth in regular services and Sunday school. His father, Cabell Calloway, Jr., was a graduate of Pennsylvania’s Lincoln University and was a lawyer who first worked in real estate in Rochester, New York. When the Calloway family moved to Baltimore, Calloway, Jr. clerked in a law firm.\(^9\) In his autobiography, Calloway remembered that his family “had status in the Negro community” as working professionals, even if that did not necessarily mean they were always comfortable financially, given that “Negro professionals were paid a hell of a lot less than white professionals with the same jobs.”\(^10\)

Two years after moving to Baltimore, Calloway, Jr. suffered from mental health issues unknown to the young Calloway, having a “nervous breakdown” and being institutionalized. Calloway never saw his father again, who died shortly thereafter.\(^11\) His mother remarried John Nelson Fortune, whom Calloway and his siblings called “Papa Jack.” Papa Jack had a series of jobs: department store employee, chauffeur for a white family, grocer (and gin bootlegger), and ad salesman for the Baltimore Afro-American. Most memorable to Calloway was Papa Jack’s work as the first African American insurance salesman for the Commercial Casualty Insurance Company. Calloway wrote in his autobiography, “Papa Jack built up the insurance business in

\(^9\) Shipton is unable to confirm Cabell Calloway, Jr.’s employment as an attorney, deeming it “family legend” and finding him listed as working in real estate in the U.S. census of Baltimore in 1900. Shipton, 1, 237.


\(^11\) Calloway and Rollins, 13-14.
the black community. He was probably the first insurance broker to really educate black
schoolteachers, doctors, dentists, and other professionals in Baltimore about life insurance. He
says that within a couple of years he had over 80 per cent of the Negro teachers in Baltimore.”

Calloway remembered the roots of his parents in the black middle class, evident in the
“three-story wood frame middle-class home[s]” of his maternal “Grandma Reed” and paternal
“Grandma Calloway.” While in Baltimore during the 1910s and 1920s, Martha and Papa
Jack’s middle-class income afforded the family the choice to rent residences in Baltimore’s
emerging black suburban neighborhoods. When Calloway was a teenager, his mother and
stepfather moved the family to “a small suburban development seven or eight miles outside
Baltimore called Wilson Park.” Harry O’Neill Wilson, an African American entrepreneur who
founded the Mutual Benefit Society in 1903 to provide insurance to other African Americans,
purchased and developed a few hundred acres to construct Wilson Park’s homes for African
American professionals to own or rent in the segregated city. Calloway recalled, “[Wilson]
lived out there, too, and his children were about my age. We rented a great big house on a
corner. It had four bedrooms, a garage, a big lawn, and hedges all around. But it was the
Wilsons who had the nicest house in the park. It was at the end of a long drive, up on a hill, with
a swimming pool.” Renting a Wilson Park home afforded the family access to stable
education, albeit far from elite primary school training. On his junior high education at the
Lauraville School, where he played baseball and basketball and became valedictorian out of a
class of four students, Calloway reflected, “I’m very proud of coming out of a school like that

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13 Calloway and Rollins, 21-22, 24-25, 32.
14 Calloway and Rollins, 14.
15 Charles Belfoure, “Pride flows forth from historic past,” Baltimore Sun, August 26, 2001, accessed Jan 15, 2015,
16 Calloway and Rollins, 29.
and going on to do the things I’ve done in life. The conditions for learning weren’t very good—we had few books or supplies—but the teachers gave us attention and love and understanding. They were stern, too. They pushed us to learn, but they were sensitive to each child so that nobody ever felt left out or uncared for. The quality of education at that school was less important to me than the feeling of confidence and security that I got from it.”

Convincing Calloway to commit to his studies was a constant struggle for his mother and stepfather, who feared the youth being labeled a “delinquent” and the attendant social embarrassment for respectable black parents (Martha was also a clubwoman who hosted meetings in her home). Calloway was inclined to skip school, he played craps on street corners or in the woods on Sundays, and he had a penchant for getting into fights. In her scholarship on early-twentieth century race leadership and gender in North Carolina, Angela Hornsby-Gutting examines middle-class African American religious, educational, and social leaders as they attempted to address the “Boy Problem” through proscriptive literature, community building, and establishing civic and recreational space. For instance, the racial uplift manual Floyd’s Flowers provided moral instruction for forging boys and girls into “good men and good women,” and Calloway’s recreational habits and aversion to Sunday school would have qualified him either as rowdy or, worse, as a “Bad Boy” in black middle-class categorizations of youth.

17 Calloway and Rollins, 29-30.
18 Calloway and Rollins, 7, 30-31.
19 Hornsby-Gutting summarizes Floyd’s Flowers’s description of adolescent male delinquent behavior: “Boys could be rowdy and ‘bad.’ The rowdy boy cut class, smoked cigarettes, proved ‘saucy and impudent to older people,’ was a bully, and attended Sunday school infrequently. ‘Bad Boys’ were more than mischievous; they were ‘bad in head and in deed.’ They could be found in chain gangs or wearing disheveled clothes on street corners. They smoked cigarettes, rolled dice, and sought leisure in saloons, ‘drinking, playing pool and playing cards.’” See Angela Hornsby-Gutting, *Black Manhood and Community Building in North Carolina, 1900-1930* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009), 53-54.
Around age fourteen, while Calloway was playing craps instead of attending Sunday School, Martha caught him on her way home from church, and she later decided to send him to a church run-boarding school in Pennsylvania for African American young men and women. Downingtown Industrial and Agricultural School (DIAS) was founded around 1904 and 1905 by Dr. William A. Creditt, pastor of Philadelphia’s First African Baptist Church and the brother of Calloway’s maternal grandmother, Anna Creditt Reed.20 With John S. Trower, one of the nation’s wealthiest African Americans and a member of First African Baptist, Calloway’s great-uncle sought to model the instruction of Atlanta’s Tuskegee Institute for adolescents in a northern U.S. city. DIAS became a state-funded institution in 1907, and it sat on a 110-acre campus with two dormitories. The school enrolled 110 young black women and men each year, whose parents or guardians submitted applications on their behalf. DIAS was well known by the 1920s when Calloway enrolled, due to the school’s advertising in major northeastern African American newspapers.21 Calloway remembered a larger campus and student body at DIAS, writing in his autobiography that the school sat on about 200 acres and enrolled about 200 students. Beyond this estimate, Calloway recalled his daily tasks: “We were supposed to cultivate the farm, learn a trade, and take regular academic courses like reading and math and history…Actually we were a mixture of students and truants. Like I said, it was more a reform school than an agricultural and industrial school.” Calloway further recalled that classwork occurred two days each week, with manual work on the farm or training in shops for the rest of the week. Such a delinquency reform project as DIAS, which African American middle-class

20 Calloway and Rollins, 18, 26.
race representatives instituted in their commitments to racial uplift, sought to instill what historian Martin Summers defines as a Victorian-era ethos of middle-class manhood characterized by “production (or engagement in the marketplace), character, respectability, and the producer values of industry, thrift, regularity, and temperance.”

In the spring of 1922, after attending DIAS for a year, Calloway left the school without notice and returned to Baltimore, committing thenceforward to take his studies seriously.

Martha and Papa Jack expected Calloway to follow his late father’s example by studying law after completing high school. Encouraging Calloway in this respectable direction also meant recognizing and cultivating his potentially respectable talent—singing. Calloway, a tenor “with a range from around C to B above C,” often performed in church choirs, and his parents allowed him to take private voice lessons in his teenage years. Ruth Macabee, a family friend and former concert singer, instructed Calloway in opera and classical singing every Wednesday for two years: “She taught me the fundamentals; like how to breathe, place my tones, and use my diaphragm to get the sound that I wanted. I would spend hours holding my tongue with a handkerchief and singing the scale, up and down, up and down, until I could sing a scale with a handkerchief around my tongue as well as most people without one.” To practice elocution, Calloway spent hours counting from one to ten “to get the execution of the sounds precise and correct,” following Macabee’s instruction that “it is not enough to be able to sing and hold a key, people have to understand your lyrics.” Calloway continued his musical instruction in high school, taking voice lessons and basic music theory from Llewelyn Wilson.

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24 Calloway and Rollins, 25.
25 Calloway and Rollins, 35, 36, 40.
Calloway’s parents and music instructors likely assumed they were preparing him for the performance of the respectable vocal arts—the singing of classical European music, Protestant hymns, and the concert-style African American spirituals. However, he was intent on honing his talents for the non-respectable art forms of the early 1920s—popular musical entertainment like revues and vaudeville shows, in addition to singing and playing drums for Dixieland and “straight jazz” music in Baltimore bands. Calloway recalled that Ruth Macabee considered jazz “below her” and forbade him to sing it. With singing, Calloway had learned to play drums in high school. Always “hustling” to earn additional income for himself and his family, he performed in Baltimore speakeasies without the knowledge of his parents and voice music teachers: “There’d be someone cooking ribs and barbecue and pigs’ feet in the kitchen. Everybody would be laughing and dancing and hollering behind the music, which was always loud. We drank gin, wine, and whiskey, mostly old, hard bootleg rye. Mama and Papa Jack and my music teachers didn’t know I was performing in these places. Jesus, they would have been mad as hell. They forbade me to go near them, but since they never went into them themselves, I was pretty safe.”

Despite the intentions of his black middle-class parents and teachers, the young Calloway appeared unable and unwilling to aspire to the respectable Negro ideal. The teenager had less than respectable professional goals and leisure habits centered around dancing and drinking—although imbibing at parties at an early age, he actually first became intoxicated while serving drinks for one of his mother’s club meetings, and he had already been helping Papa Jack sell

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26 Calloway described the “straight jazz” style of Johnny Jones’s Arabian Ten Orchestra, one of the bands in which he performed, as “a Baltimore version of New Orleans dixieland [sic] with a heavy two-four rhythm, pounding bass drum, banjo, piano, and jumping, syncopated cornets, and trumpets.” Calloway and Rollins, 38.
27 Calloway and Rollins, 40.
28 Calloway and Rollins, 32.
29 Calloway and Rollins, 38-40.
bootleg alcohol.\textsuperscript{30} And despite the presence of African American clergy in his extended family and a mother who was a church organist, Calloway expressed a lack of interest in African American Protestant church life and attendance. The older Calloway, reflecting on his adolescent days living with his paternal grandparents and his desire to avoid Sunday services and Sunday school, characterized his younger self’s admiration for his paternal grandfather, himself a “hustler” who owned a pool hall in Baltimore. Calloway regretted not seeing more of his grandfather, because his parents and paternal grandmother deemed the pool hall “off limits” for him. Instead, at the insistence of his mother and grandmother, the young Calloway and his siblings were to attend Baltimore’s Grace Presbyterian Church services and Bible school “…every damned Sunday, rain or shine, from early in the morning till late afternoon.” This humorous recollection included the imagery of all family members “get[ting] dressed up and walk[ing] nicely to church together,” possibly revealing the older Calloway’s disagreeable memory of this required weekly routine. This may have also been his attempt to relate to readers who were also familiar with the apparently exhausting Sunday ritual to “keep up appearances” within the community, if not to sincerely enjoy Christian worship, sermons, and instruction. What stood out to Calloway as respectable, alternatively, was his grandfather’s ownership of the pool hall, which he noted his family was “very open about” despite being “strong churchgoing people”: “In fact, we were all proud of it. No one else in our neighborhood had a grandfather who went off to New York City for months at a time and owned a pool hall as well.”\textsuperscript{31}

Between the death of Calloway’s father and Martha’s remarriage to Papa Jack, she moved her children to live in her mother’s home. Calloway remembered Grandma Reed as less

\textsuperscript{30} Calloway and Rollins, 31.
\textsuperscript{31} Calloway and Rollins, 12.
strict than Grandma Calloway, explaining this moment in adolescence as his opportunity to break away from his regular church attendance and to appreciate leisure and hustling for employment with friends:

At Grandmother Reed’s I began to break out of the restrictions of Grandma Calloway’s house. To begin with I stopped going to church, although my mother was always on me about it. But now there were more important things to do on Sunday morning, like selling newspapers. I guess I went from one extreme to the other. One year I was spending three or four hours in church every Sunday plus Bible classes during the week, Bible school every day during the summer, and singing in the junior choir, and the next I was a part of a gang of guys who were basically young hustlers. We had two interests—making money and having a good time.\(^\text{32}\)

As noted previously, an incident where Calloway, about age fourteen, skipped Sunday school to play craps led to his enrollment at Downingtown. When he returned from Downingtown and moved with the family to Wilson Park, he returned to regular church attendance: “Going to church was like going to school—there was nothing else to do. Everybody went to church out there, so I’d get myself all dressed up and we’d walk down to the little church.” Additionally, the teenage Calloway mainly looked forward to bonding with other adult men in his congregation on Sunday afternoons: “Then, after church, the men would go out into the woods to shoot craps. We’d have a hell of a crap game every Sunday. Papa Jack was one of the few men who wouldn’t go. He didn’t believe in gambling, but I took his place and shot craps right along with the men.”\(^\text{33}\) Likely gambling with the additional income he made from his various jobs (some of which he also gave to his mother to support their family), the teenage Calloway balanced religious and recreational time on the Sabbath, despite the disapproval of his parents.

\(^\text{32}\) Calloway and Rollins, 15.
\(^\text{33}\) Calloway and Rollins, 31.
The older, reflective Calloway framed his social habits during high school as representing a tension between two social worlds he chose to navigate. With his narrative, he ascribed an independent assertiveness to his younger self that prevented him from fully imbibing the nightlife’s intoxicants or accepting the black middle class’s respectable social script:

I guess that I grew up quickly and somewhat disjointedly during those high school years. On the one hand, my family and my music teachers, whom I loved and respected, were rather puritanical people: churchgoing, middle class, strivers. On the other hand, I spent a lot of my time in that rough and raucous Baltimore Negro night life with loud music, heavy drinking, and the kind of moral standards or lack of them that my parents looked down on. I managed pretty well in both worlds, I suppose, because I was accustomed to thinking for myself. I didn’t get taken in entirely by the night life, but I didn’t get taken in entirely by the middle-class values either. I’ve been like that ever since.  

In evaluating his life and career, Calloway rendered youthful desires for personal independence as instructive and indicative of later successes in life. In his writing, he qualified his respect for black middle-class ideals with a playful irreverence toward black Protestant religious life and the expectation that black young men must be in attendance dutifully and abstain from all other tempting leisure activities. Calloway became sexually active around age seventeen—although due to a “wandering eye” this activity was not even with his “respectable” partner at the time. He had been dating Zarita Steptoe, the daughter of the pastor of Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Baltimore. Calloway remarked, “In fact, the main reason that I was going to church at all those days was to be near Zarita. But like most boys that age, I had a wandering eye.” He began a relationship with Zelma Proctor, and the two shared their first sexual experience. The result was Proctor’s pregnancy. Calloway wrote that while he was “uncertain” about what to do, likely referring to continuing the pregnancy, Proctor informed Calloway she

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34 Calloway and Rollins, 46.
would carry it to term. Calloway decided to marry Proctor, but she declined because she considered herself too young and him to be “too fly-by-night” for marriage. Calloway recalled his mother agreeing with Proctor not wanting to marry her son, given that the young woman “had a lot of boyfriends” and that, consequently, no one would find him at fault for not marrying her.\textsuperscript{35}

Calloway did not provide introspective reflections on his early romantic relationships and sexual practices. Nevertheless, his late-adolescent leisure habits, active heterosexuality, and aversion to black religious moral instruction reflected some aspects of what Martin Summers defines as a shift from a Victorian-era production ethos which defined middle-class manhood to a modern, postwar American ethos of consumption which fostered a sense of middle-class manliness where “the goods one owned, the leisure practices one engaged in, and one’s physical and sexual virility” supplanted aspirations to respectability.\textsuperscript{36} However, Calloway’s aspiration to participate in jazz culture professionally, as a producer of music for popular consumption, strongly suggests that he did not represent the stark opposition of a modern consumption ethos against the previous generations’ Victorian-influenced production ethos. Instead, Calloway’s musical performance and personal practices allowed him to represent one possibility of a modern, iconoclastic black masculinity in jazz.\textsuperscript{37} His pursuit of jazz as a viable profession for

\textsuperscript{35} Calloway and Rollins, 46-47.

\textsuperscript{36} Summers defines this American ethos of consumption across class, ethnicity, race, and region as “…the devotion to the idea that the acquisition, display, and use of commodities could provide personal self-fulfillment as well as signal one’s social position,” which “became the central organizing principles for how individuals experienced their own identity and interacted with one another.” While I regard Calloway’s choice to become a jazz professional as an apparent deviation from the modern consumption ethos, Summers notes that “even as younger blacks in the 1920s constructed a modern ethos of masculinity that was antithetical to an older generation’s ideals of manhood, many of them clung—some unconsciously and others very deliberately—to many of the constitutive values of manliness such as production and independence.” Summers, 7, 14, 152, 156.

\textsuperscript{37} Summers locates this iconoclastic identity among several Harlem Renaissance writers, generalizing this masculine ethos to apply to other African American men as the construction and performance of “…gender subjectivity through the elevation of the physical and sexual potency of the body, consumption and self-gratification, and an individual self-expression that was not confined by the black bourgeoisie’s standards of propriety.” Summers, 152.
black celebrity demonstrated to working- and middle-class African Americans a (lucrative) realm of race representation in the late 1920s and 1930s, one with broad national media exposure and independent of higher educational training, licensing, or ordination.

Without any money, Calloway and Proctor decided to leave Baltimore for New York. Calloway was able to find regular pay performing in Atlantic City speakeasies, clubs, and restaurants. Proctor decided to travel to New York on her own to stay with an aunt, and they parted ways with Calloway returning to Baltimore. Although he recalled regretting not being in the life of his daughter, Camay, he stated that he continued to support his daughter financially and that he had developed meaningful relationships as an adult with Proctor, Proctor’s husband, his daughter, his son-in-law, and his grandchildren.38

Calloway completed high school in 1927 at age twenty, while continuing to perform in local Baltimore clubs. Calloway admired his older sister, Blanche, who had already entered the entertainment industry and had become one of the stars of the musical Plantation Days. Blanche lived and worked in Chicago, and Calloway wished to follow her after high school. She and his mother permitted Calloway’s ambition for musical success only if he also promised to enroll in coursework at Crane College. Calloway agreed and moved to Chicago with his sister, where she arranged for him an audition for Plantation Days (and he was cast as a high-tenor singer). Calloway attended Crane Junior College for free because he lived at Blanche’s Chicago residence, and after January 1928, about four months into schooling, Calloway returned to part-time singing:39 “It was a different kind of life when I started to sing again. I didn’t really have

38 Calloway and Rollins, 46-49.
time to study, so I started to cheat a bit. I had a little girl who used to do my work. She would write my papers and helped me to get ready for tests. Thelma Eubanks was her name. I needed her help because I was beginning to get into everything again, just like I had in high school.”

Calloway eventually made his way to New York City and Harlem by late 1929 after performing with several bands, and his orchestra became the famous Cotton Club’s replacement band for Duke Ellington whenever the latter musician and his orchestra were on tour. In 1931 he recorded his most famous tune, “Minnie the Moocher,” which featured his “Hi-De-Ho” call-and-response with the orchestra that he would replicate with audiences for the rest of his career.

The black press noted his sudden rise, and a 1931 *Pittsburgh Courier* special feature on Calloway attempted to provide a “respectable” narrative for his life, noting his church choir roots in Baltimore’s Bethel A. M. E. Church, portraying him as monogamous by mentioning his wife Wenonah Conacher (mistakenly called “Denoanah Corey”), and by depicting him as a family man who “likes a nice medium steak cooked by his wife, smokes a pipe, and attends an A. M. E. Church whenever he can.” The piece also noted that Calloway recorded two songs, “St. James Infirmary” and “Is That Religion?”

The following section explores the messages and representations Calloway produced through such music that conflicted with his press presentation as the respectable result of black Protestantism.

**Musical Mimicry of the Ministry**

In 1930, Calloway and his orchestra recorded a cover of “Is That Religion?” a comedic criticism of sexual impropriety in black religious houses of worship written by African American composer Maceo Pinkard and Jewish American lyricist Mitchell Parish. Duke Ellington and His

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40 Calloway and Rollins, 57.
Orchestra also recorded a version of “Is That Religion?” in 1931. This composition entered a culture where images of black preachers and churchwomen were the constant fodder of comedic portraits, and African American music scholar Teresa L. Reed notes that for a popular audience, Ellington’s version, sung by a preacher in “a highly theatrical, burlesque singing style” helped to reinforce the stereotype of African American churches as “place[s] not of devotion but of unbridled sexuality.” The Calloway version featured the bandleader as preacher (or elder), accompanied by “call-and-response” vocals from a chorus—an arrangement imitating the era’s popular black phonograph preachers who employed a “staged and primed studio congregation” to enhance their sermons with “singing, clapping, shouts of affirmation, and popular music.” According to a *Chicago Defender* article in April 1931, the Calloway version of “Is That Religion?” was “adjudged one of the best discs of the month.” *Pittsburgh Courier* reader Annette Brown wrote to the paper that “Is That Religion?” as performed by Belton’s Florida Syncopators, was one of her favorite tunes. With his version, Calloway performed a musical imitation of folk sermons that revealed his deep familiarity (and perhaps exhaustion) with this African American tradition.

The tune begins with Calloway the preacher calling and responding to his choir:

Brethren  
Sisteren  
I got shoes, you got shoes  
All God’s children got shoes!  
Brethren (*Yeah! Sing it, Brother!*)  
Sisteren (*Yeah!*)  
Oh, hear my preachin’  
Hear my preachin’, do! (*Yes, Elder!*)

44 See “Going Backstage with the Scribe,” *Chicago Defender*. April 4, 1931, 5; and Floyd G. Snelson, Jr., “Duke Continues to Lead in Big *Courier* Contest; Others Gain,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, September 26, 1931, 11.
Brethren (*Yeah! Glory!*)
Sisteren (*Yeah! Have mercy!*)
The Good Book teachin’
Ain’t been reachin’ you! (*Ain’t it true, ain’t it true?*)

Sisters strut the aisle
All dressed to kill with style
You wink your eye and smile
Is that religion? (*Oh, you’ve got me, preacher!*)
One thing I do despise
You catch my deacon’s eyes
That’s where the weakness lies
Is that religion? (*Tell ’em all about it!*)

You see, your parson’s vexed (*churchwoman’s response*)
Doggone it, you’ve got him so perplexed (*woman and man respond*)
Now, you know doggone well, my mind ain’t on my text!
Now, tell me, is that religion? (*That’s it, brother*)
You know there’s gonna be some cheatin’ did (*antiphonal singing*)
You all done took me off my lid
Tryin’ to get your parson to skid
Now you know doggone well that ain’t religion!  

The remainder of this jazz tune contains an instrumental version of the melody, featuring a solo accompanied by the church sister saying “Amen, Amen!” to the muted trumpet. The initial, brief singing of the African American spiritual “All God’s Children Got Shoes” indicates this tune’s object of humor is the southern African American Protestantism from which Calloway’s preacher derives. Parish’s lyrics employ the term “parson” for the minister, and the black chorus’ use of the titles Elder and Brother when responding to each of the preacher’s lines identify the song firmly with black Protestant and Holiness-Pentecostal traditions. Calloway the preacher’s rising and falling inflections in the lines “One thing I DOOO despiiiiiise / You catch my DEAcon’s eyyyyyyyyes” serve as instances revealing his familiarity with the melodic

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whooping of black folk sermons. And the tempo of the song is well suited for dancing, so the contemporary hearer may imagine phonograph listeners dancing along to Calloway’s sermon about ministerial promiscuity.

With the Ellington version of this tune, the sisters who wink and “strut the aisle” and the parson who is “so perplexed” appear to share equal blame for their sexual impropriety and moral hypocrisy. With Calloway as the preacher, however, this character is clearly most deserving of ridicule—he blames the women of his congregation for arousing himself and his deacons, he implies that they are at fault if (and when) he or others pursue each other, and he is someone whose refinement and education are questionable, evident in his use of the colloquial exclamation “doggone it” and the pronunciation of perplexed as “preplexed.” The responses of the church members become ironic, accenting the preacher who vents his sexual frustrations and admits his carnal intentions. Calloway and the other voices structure this humorous performance for those familiar with Sunday sermons to enjoy, focusing on a recognizable instance where church settings appear to have latent sexual tensions and where some regular (yet unenthusiastic) black churchgoers may suspect that the ostensibly devout maintain the same sexual desires as others.

According to Calloway biographer Alyn Shipton, this song performance was an artistic instance of using a record “not so much to satirize religion, but to use its familiar tropes as a new way to engage an audience.” However, given Calloway’s autobiographical reflections about his adolescent disdain for church attendance and fondness for the church sisters his age, it is probable that he enjoyed the opportunity to sing his opinion that he and the black clergy he

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encountered shared similar desires. And more so than Ellington’s version, Calloway’s arrangement of “Is That Religion?” conveyed the musician’s familiarity with black Protestant “low-church” preaching through its imitation of prominent black phonograph preachers and their recorded sermons. So while Shipton is accurate that Calloway employed black sermonizers’ race record genre “as a setting for entertainment…in the very kind of nightclub most frowned upon by preachers of the type Cab was emulating” and that this was a “genuinely original” innovation in this era of jazz, his performance is more critical of a particular religious setting, cast of conventional characters, and muted sexual tensions for many black Protestants than Shipton grants.  

To perform “Is That Religion?” in clubs on Saturday nights leading into the Christian Sabbath, in particular, may have allowed patrons, alongside radio and phonograph listeners in their homes, to revel in a popular musician identifying with church experiences they anticipated witnessing the next morning in service (if they planned to be awake and to attend).

Desire “ain’t religion” for Calloway; nevertheless, the musician humorously celebrated desire and its unavoidable presence in the religious lives, practices, and associations of African Americans. In the early years of his career, Calloway and his orchestra performed “Miss Hallelujah Brown,” with lyrics by Benny Davis and music by J. Fred Coots, and they recorded the song in 1938:

[Male chorus] Hallelujah, Hallelujah!
[Calloway] Was the lady’s name when she sang in the choir [Hallelujah]
[Male chorus] Hallelujah, Hallelujah!
Since she left the old church choir
Brother, she’s a bowl of fire!

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47 Shipton, 44.
Who’s got the fellas prayin’?
Who’s turned things upside down?
Who goes without saying?
Miss Hallelujah Brown
Who’s got the gals all squirmin’?
Who’s goin’ right to town?
Who’s got a new sermon?
Miss Hallelujah Brown!

She don’t do no preachin’
’Bout the Lord above
She confines her preachin’ to
That precious thing called love

Don’t blame the fellas, do ya
The way they hang around
Hats off and here’s to ya
Miss Hallelujah Brown!49

This Calloway arrangement follows the lyrical portion with call and response phrases between the horns and clarinet soloist, solos from trombone and tenor saxophone, a reed feature with horns, and concludes with Calloway proclaiming, “Hallelujah! Hallelujah! / Hallelujah for Miss Hallelujah Brown!” Davis and Coots were prolific white vaudeville song composers and performers, and unlike Calloway’s performance of “Is That Religion?” his arrangement of “Miss Hallelujah Brown” does not attempt to reproduce the familiar sounds of African American churches. Instead, his decision to perform this white songwriters’ tune indicates a celebration of its lyrical depiction of an attractive, formerly pious, “fast” black woman (her racial identity presumed according to the given last name) who offers carnal excitement for men, engenders resentment from other women, “preaches” an erotic love, and does not regret backsliding.

Calloway’s vocal presence in motion pictures also celebrated irreverent living in African American culture. In the 1933 animated Betty Boop short film, *Snow-White*, Calloway voiced Koko the Clown for a performance of the popular tune “St. James Infirmary.” Calloway’s famous dancing appeared in the film due to rotoscoping, an animation technique that involved tracing over footage of his live “dance-walk” moves (and Koko the Clown transforms into a long-legged ghost). His version of the lyrics, substituting “hallelujah” for “hell” in one line, indicated what he considered a jazz man’s appropriate funeral celebration: “Then give me six crap-shootin’ pallbearers / Let a chorus girl sing me a song / Put a red-hot jazz band at the top of my head / So we can raise hallelujah as we go along.” Calloway’s irreverence in this performance highlighted the gambling habits, women, and music he preferred as worthy of high praise rather than damnation. And while the Louis Armstrong recorded version of “St. James Infirmary” ended this verse with “Raise hell as I stroll along,” Calloway’s version substituted “hallelujah” for “hell” because the Motion Picture Production Code forbade the use of the latter word. To “raise hallelujah” further provided an affirmative spin on this popular dirge as a song to celebrate a jazz man’s lifestyle and its material, carnal, and musical delights. Rather than support popular disregard for jazz living as socially and culturally adverse for African Americans, as with a “worldly” man’s funeral procession that “raised hell” or created

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50 Animation historian Paul Wells writes that *Snow-White’s* depiction of the jazz world, via Calloway’s ghostly performance of “St. James’ Infirmary Blues,” fostered the association of black urban culture and nightlife with doom and demise: “The ghost sings ‘St. James’ Infirmary Blues’ as the coffin passes into the dark cavern of the underworld, populated by skeletons and decorated with fatalistic symbols such as dice and cards....The dips and loops that characterise the movement enable the character of the ghost to operate as...a literal illustration of the lyrics. These metamorphoses intensify the adult nature of the imagery employed in the blues idiom and locate the cartoon not merely in a demonstrably hellish environment but also in the underworld of vice and criminality.” Of this scene and other Calloway appearances in Fleischer Studios cartoons, Wells also writes that Betty Boop ends up in a “dark, mysterious underworld, characterized by transgressive behaviour and taboo imagery. Even in its crudest forms, representations of black-ness or black-oriented contexts, operate as signifiers of danger and cultural threat.” Wells, *Understanding Animation* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 75, 217.


posthumous social disruption, Calloway’s vocal performance and altered lyrics to “raise hallelujah” rather than “hell” in this jazz procession affirms a jazz man’s passing as a “holy death” worthy of celebration.

Calloway wrote of his attitude toward belief and religious institutions in his autobiography:

“I’m an Episcopalian now—I converted in the 1930s—and I’m still a firm believer in church and in God. I don’t think of myself as a religious person. I love to live. I like the good life. I enjoy entertaining and I get as much satisfaction out of giving people pleasure as I do out of going to church. Maybe entertaining is my way of expressing godliness. Lord knows, there are worse ways.”

What was a “religious person” for Calloway? Was it someone inclined to “get happy” through ecstatic religious expressions, as he noted in “Harlem Camp Meeting”? Was his Episcopalian affiliation a signal that he wished to participate in a religious tradition that did not emphasize shouting or dancing as signs of holiness or devotion? If Calloway was not suggesting a direct rejection of certain African American worship practices, then perhaps to be a “religious person” was to avoid living “the good life” that he celebrated in his music. For Calloway, providing joy to others through entertainment was personally gratifying and an acceptable vocational objective in lieu of dutiful church attendance. But with the suggestion that there are “worse ways” of “expressing godliness,” is it possible Calloway was referring to types of religious worship he found either distasteful, insincere, or hypocritical? Ultimately, it is not difficult to misinterpret this brief reflection and overlook Calloway providing a constructive but vague appreciation for institutional religious life and a fundamental belief in the divine.

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52 Calloway and Rollins, 12.
From Comedian to Ribald Race Representative

Calloway’s humorous takes on black Protestant church life held the promise of producing critical black humor about shared cultural experiences, practices, and social figures as novel music for black buying populaces to consume and enjoy. The peril, inherent in this media’s commodification, was its accessibility to white audiences and the tacit permission for them to deride and pathologize African American religious beliefs and practices, in addition to black sexuality—or to continue doing so, now with the music of Calloway and others as further black cultural data. As chapter one has illustrated, modernist middle-class black Protestant clergy of the 1920s and 1930s criticized both “old time” black Protestantism and black popular music for the very reason that white scrutiny and judgment of African American culture presented a constant impediment to their pursuit of social equality through race representation. And these preachers were likely to criticize black musicians who sang white lyricists’ words about humorous aspects of black culture as complicit in the effort to maintain Jim Crow’s system of racial discrimination. However, it is important to acknowledge that African American musicians may have written or composed this music, because whites in the professional music industry were often likely to receive songwriting credits and royalties for compositions by uncredited black composers.53

The dilemma for popular black musicians like Calloway, who wished to create and perform musical expressions that celebrated and criticized aspects of African American culture, was that musical celebrity and the potential for cross-racial appeal came with visibility for

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53 Harvey G. Cohen discusses jazz publisher Irving Mills’s contract with Duke Ellington early in his career, where the former often added his name to Ellington’s song credits and, consequently, received royalties for several compositions by Ellington and his orchestra musicians (whom Ellington often did not credit as sole composers or co-composers). See Cohen, *Duke Ellington’s America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010).
African Americans and the assumption that popular art captured representations of some ingrained cultural disposition. In other words, white audiences may have perceived racial performance to be coterminous with racial essence. Consequently, Calloway and others became de facto race representatives. One instance of this perceived representativeness occurred in 1932 when the white pastor of New York’s Broadway Temple Methodist Episcopal Church, Rev. Dr. Christian F. Reisner, invited Calloway to perform on a Sunday evening to revive the “old-time religion.” In the words of the *Philadelphia Tribune*, Reisner asked Calloway “to play some moving Negro spirituals for his cold-blooded white worshipers” because, in Reisner’s words, “[what we need is more of the old-fashioned thrill in religion.”54 If racially liberal white ministers were willing to regard Calloway as the bearer of an African American religious music tradition, there was no guarantee that the performer’s intent matched popular receptions of what his career and cultural production through music represented.

To create comical musical performances about African American racial identities and religious practices, Calloway’s fraught task was to present a form of humor about and for black people through jazz, but without permitting a designation of black people as essentially and enduringly ignorant and degenerate, as minstrelsy’s mockery offered. And with minstrelsy, as Paul Oliver has chronicled, there was a history of songs mocking spirituals or African American respectability politics in light of material want.55 As Calloway’s career advanced, this tension

55 Oliver writes, “Parodies of the black church, or of the spirituals sung in it, were an early element of minstrel entertainment, and this in turn may have reflected a popular secular theme. As the black church often aspired to white codes of behavior and respectability, and as a policy of accommodation had been preached from many a pulpit, more rebellious blacks resented its meekness, even if subconsciously….The fantasizing, the cynicism, the bitter humor, the satire and the parodies were all responses to the encroaching reality of Jim Crow laws, discrimination, loss of employment and political powerlessness.” See Paul Oliver, *Songsters and Saints: Vocal Traditions on Race Records* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 134-139. In contrast, this chapter finds in Calloway’s religiously irreverent performances less a denunciation of (or concern with) black Protestant respectability politics than a celebration of urban nighttime recreation that middle-class black Protestant institutions and actors sought to eradicate.
became more pronounced as the African American singer and bandleader made groundbreaking professional achievements in motion pictures, where his racial representation existed alongside competing images of minstrelsy.

For instance, Calloway signaled his role as race representative during the filming of Al Jolson’s *The Singing Kid* when he and his orchestra clashed with Warner Bros. executives because they refused to don “whiteface” for a publicity photo with Jolson in blackface.\(^{56}\) That the black press took note of Calloway’s opposition in this instance indicated their support for him as a commendable African American entertainer. They counted his refusal to perpetuate certain racial caricatures as a professional achievement.

The 1936 film *The Singing Kid* represented Calloway’s professional rise and the waning of Al Jolson’s career. Music and film scholar Arthur Knight noted that this film was a commercial failure but also interesting—and ultimately incoherent—for its attempts to provide “an explicit autocritique of the old-fashioned content of Jolson’s past while maintaining some of his modernist form and style” and also seeking “to both erase and celebrate boundaries and difference, including most emphatically the color line.”\(^{57}\) This film contains three scenes with Calloway and Jolson (as “Al Jackson”) appearing together, a cautious attempt to present a message of visual integration while elevating Calloway to the same status as Jolson in the entertainment world.\(^{58}\) At first, Calloway and Jolson sing opposite each other from “separate-

\(^{56}\) The *New York Amsterdam News* reported, “Resenting the insinuation and utter disregard for their rating as artists, Cab Calloway and the members of his band refused to don ‘whiteface’ makeup and appear with Al Jolson, who was to appear in blackface for contrast, as a publicity stunt….Cab told studio officials that he and his band would have to be photographed as they were or not at all. The photograph was not made, and the Cab Calloway unit continues in the picture as contracted.” See “Calloway Balks Whiteface Role: Hi-Di-Hi-Di-Ho Man and His Band Refuse Stunt for Movie Publicity,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, Feb 1, 1936, 13.


\(^{58}\) Calloway and songwriter Harold Arlen argued over some of Arlen’s song interpretations that Calloway saw in conflict with his performance style. Calloway recalled that Al Jolson intervened on his behalf: “Finally Jolson stepped in and said to Arlen, ‘Look, Cab knows what he wants to do; let him do it his way.’ After that, Arlen left me alone.”
but-equal” penthouses. Next, Calloway performs in a “Broadway” scene that includes the theme of religious revival, and the white actors appear as blackface characters among the African American singing and dancing club patrons. Finally, Calloway and Jolson sans-blackface appear together as white and black entertainers (of course, the all-white audience in this last scene reaffirms the films visual sign of racial segregation). The Broadway scene is set in an African American night club and features the Calloway-written “Hi-De-Ho in Your Soul.” Following this song are the Harold Arlen compositions “Who’s the Swingin’est Man in Town” and “Save Me, Sister,” which Knight classifies as a “mock sanctified” song—it contains a reference to the spiritual “Sometimes I Feel Like A Motherless Child.”59 Actress Wini Shaw’s blackfaced-angel performance appears before “Save Me, Sister,” and she and Calloway produce a sermonette that features “old-time” religious themes and melodic whooping:

(Blackface Angel) Do you hear that thunder?
(Black Chorus) Yes, we hear that thunder!
(Calloway) Well, that ain’t thunder!
(Black Chorus) Well, now we wonder, if that ain’t thunder
Then what is thunderous thunder?

(Calloway) That rowin’ you is hearin’ in the sky-blue rafter
Is nothin’ but the devil doubled up with laughter. [whoop]

He’s puttin’ on his top horn (Chorus: Yeah!)
Brushin’ off his tail, (Yeah!)
He’s gonna throw you bachelors out like
Jonah from the whale!

Calloway also remembered his band receiving posh treatment while filming in Hollywood: “And talk about integration: Hell, when the band and I got out to Hollywood, we were treated like pure royalty. Here were Jolson and I living in adjacent penthouses in a very plush hotel. We were costars in the film so we received equal treatment, no question about it. And the balcony on my penthouse was so damned big that in the afternoons when we weren’t shooting I would gather the band together on that balcony to rehearse. We really lived in style; it was a hell of an experience.” Calloway and Rollins, 131. These recollections present the complicated racial dynamics for the musician and his orchestra filming The Singing Kid, with Calloway exercising authority over his self-presentation, black celebrity treatment for the musicians, and the presence of blackface with Jolson and Wini Shaw among a cast of African American singers and dancers.

59 Knight, 73.
(Blackface Angel) Cuz there’s too much sportin’ and not enough courtin’!
(Calloway) [whoop]
(Blackface Angel) There’s too much high-life’n’ and not enough man-and-wife’n’!
(Calloway) [whoop]
(Blackface Angel) There’s too much fancy turtledovin’ and not enough real lovin’!
(Calloway) And the glutton who goes struttin’ after every sportin’ duchess
Will find himself a-wriggling in the giggling devil’s clutches!60

For Knight, this medley appears to “take seriously, if superficially, the potential in black
culture(s) for interconnecting ‘opposites’—in this instance the secular and the religious, ‘swing’
and ‘spiritual,’” and he further concludes that both Calloway and Jolson appear to be “saved” in
this performance as a result of “switch[ing] styles from the religious to the secular.” Knight’s
primary aim in analyzing this film is to determine the musical and performative contrasts
between Jolson-as-Jackson and Calloway, with an understanding that Calloway’s purpose in the
film was to introduce American audiences to a more vibrant, modern sound and style that
African Americans were producing.61 However, Knight overlooks that fact that it is both
Calloway and the angel who preach—literally bringing a divine message into the nightclub—
with Jackson alone as the attentive respondent and first-person voice in “Save Me, Sister.” This
performance of a stereotyped “fire and brimstone” sermon on (black) male sexual promiscuity
and habits of enjoying urban nightlife, in lieu of faithful monogamy, renders this African
American sermonic style and its typical messenger(s) a comically moralizing presence in modern
American life. This medley elevates a style of black religious parody to the national stage, albeit

60 Author’s transcription. From The Singing Kid, film, directed by William Keighley (1936; Beverly Hills and
61 Further, Knight writes, “…the medley suggests that African American culture—embodied by Cab Calloway, his
band, and the extras and ‘played’ by Jolson and the angel—might offer America something worth attending to, worth
seriously imitating.” Knight, 73.
also as a racially-deprecating display that likely affirmed preexisting disdain for black Protestantism as fundamentally unserious or foolish, in addition to disregard for African Americans as perpetually in need of salvation or reform. Additionally, given the film’s white songwriter, producers, and blackfaced white actors who performed in front of one of the era’s most popular African American swing orchestras and against the backdrop of the black club patrons-turned-choir—and in this film, like many others, the African American vocals are from the Hall Johnson choir—the question of who was permitted to laugh at these black characters stood alongside the question of who benefitted from this religiously irreverent and racially derogatory performance. Ultimately, as Knight notes, the black press appreciated Calloway’s performance in *The Singing Kid* as “a too rare opportunity to see a popular black performer on screen—and on screen for more than just a couple minutes or in a narrative role that straightjacketed him or her in a demeaning stereotype.”

The older Calloway offered autobiographical insights into his thoughts about race and racial identity in this earlier period of his career. Writing in an era where black became the

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62 Knight also documents the support of Jolson in the *Pittsburgh Courier* after a *Chicago Defender* story in 1938 noted that he signed a restrictive housing covenant. The entertainer responded in a series of *Courier* articles by claiming that he would never “knowingly offend any race,” and he defended his career as supportive of African Americans through his hiring practices, his upbringing around African Americans, and his belief that his blackface impersonation implied his appreciation of black humor and consequent empathy with black suffering. Knight analyzes Jolson’s series of responses as representing different conceptions of cultural representation, imitation, and responsibility between black and white Americans—aside from the inherently complex appreciation of blackface comedy within both communities at the time: “Jolson’s most significant addition to his defense…is the awkward and awkwardly repeated adverb, ‘knowingly’—‘an actor cannot knowingly offend,’ ‘I couldn’t knowingly add to [blacks’] plight’—which introduces the twin specters of ideology and the unconscious. The question Jolson raised emphatically for African Americans in 1938 was this: What is the relationship between ‘fool act(s)’—blackface donned, ‘black’ song sung, and, perhaps, black people employed repeatedly—in a mass entertainment medium and the more directly political, materially effective world of restrictive covenants and segregated labor markets? For African Americans there was and is no single and clear cut answer to this question….What the *Defender* and the *Courier* share, however, and what distinguishes black and white thought on connections of politics and culture in the thirties (and still does), is the sense that noting and probing such connections are not fool acts. Jolson’s meaning for African Americans might not have been clear in 1938, but few blacks seem to have doubted that he and the range of complex practices he embodied had a meaning, one that had to do with African American culture and one that they should actively attempt to extract and (re)shape.” Knight, 77-81.
preferred label for African American racial identity, Calloway recalled identifying primarily as “Negro” or colored: “To call somebody black was an insult; and, of course, to call me black, light-skinned as I was, was a triple insult.” His performance of the 1932 song, “A Strictly Cullud Affair” by Maceo Pinkard along with lyricist Allen J. Neiburg, celebrated his generation’s exclusively “colored” spaces that encompassed the variety of African American skin hues, which the song’s lyrics highlight:

When your spirits are low, there’s a place you can go
You never see white folks, at a strictly cullud affair.

See ’em layin’ ’em down, boys, they goin’ to town
You’ll see a few light folks, but they all got cullud folks’ hair.

It’s given by the cullud ladies’ auxiliary
Come on, brothers, check in all your artillery.

Spend your nickels and dimes, have some marvelous times
I mean it’s too tight, folks, at a strictly cullud affair.63

As one of the many “light folks” with “cullud folks’ hair,” (although he straightened his own) Calloway remarked on others’ (mis)perceptions about his skin tone: “Whenever people ask me where the white blood in my family is, I tell them, ‘Hell, there was a nigger somewhere back there who jumped over the fence—and, man, something happened.’”64 Labeling this interracial sexual practice “nighttime integration,” Calloway offered the colloquial belief that many other white Americans who made assumptions about their racial identity without knowing their family history likely had ancestors who “jumped a fence and integrated them the quick way, without busing or anything,” in comical reference to school integration practices. Because his Baltimore

64 Calloway and Rollins, 41-42. The author assumes Calloway’s actual pronunciation of the pejorative “nigger” to have been the colloquial “nigga” pronunciation that African Americans have used.
youth was racially segregated, Calloway did not encounter white racial hostility. When he entered the music industry, he was required to perform in segregated venues and travel through all-white areas. However, Calloway recalled that his light complexion led him to experience some hostility from other African Americans:

> Even black people have given me a hard way to go sometimes. They’ve called me dirty yellor and poor white. That went on for years in the thirties and forties. Some people were bothered because they couldn’t classify me easily; they thought I was Cuban or Puerto Rican. It’s a horrible thing when people want to classify you or resort to name calling, but I’ve come through it because I’ve always known, from the day when I was a nigger kid selling papers and hustling shoeshines and walking hots out at Pimlico—hell, I’m a nigger and proud of it.

Apparently, racial irreverence accompanied religious irreverence for Calloway. His use of the racial slur when recalling the “hustling” past that led to his successful and lucrative career signified the determined work ethic that he and others who often bore that pejorative label embodied. But with this reflection, Calloway also indicated his particular experience with colorism, when people used his complexion to perceive his ethnic identity as other than African American. He sang the 1930 tune “Yaller,” a composition by Charles M. Schwab and Henry Myers with social significance for its assertion that lighter-complexioned African Americans—

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65 In his autobiography, Calloway recounted a 1940s incident in Kansas City where he was not permitted to attend Lionel Hampton’s show at the Playmore Ballroom, resulting in a physical altercation with the white usher (who was also an off-duty police officer) and Calloway’s subsequent arrest. He also recounted attempting to move into the summer house of his friend, Nat Debin, in Lido Beach, Hempstead, NY and encountering signs that read “Nigger, go home.” “Nigger, leave here.” and “We don’t want niggers in Lido Beach.” Calloway’s reflection was that he and his wife, Nuffie, resolved to stay and were residents for about twelve years: “It was a hell of a thing and it hurt us. I tried not to pay any attention to it, and I’ve never blamed anyone for it. It was a Jewish community and they had never had a Negro out around there. I just told myself, ‘There’s bad in every group. You can’t blame the whole group for what one or two people do; that’s a shitty way to treat people.’...We were quite a family. And we soon found out that in spite of the way we had been welcomed, there were some damned nice people out there.” Calloway and Rollins, 44-45.

66 Calloway and Rollins, 42. Calloway’s “hot walking” at Baltimore’s Pimlico Race Course was the practice of leading and grooming horses as exercise or to cool them down following their races. See Shipton, 5.
regarded as “yellow” or “high yellow”—were disregarded by blacks and whites for not fitting this American racial binary:

I ain’t even black, I ain’t even white
I ain’t like the day, and I ain’t like the night.
Feeling mean, so in between
I’m just a high yaller.
Ain’t even bad, I ain’t even good
I don’t understand, and I ain’t understood.
Not a friend sticks to the end
When you’re yaller.

Take me to a church and make me pray.
Make me sing a psalm there.
But ya better leave my soul in a crude café
’Cuz I know I belong there.
O Lord, can’t you make a sinner a saint?
Why did you start me then run out of paint?
Pass me by, a no account yaller man.67

Like Calloway’s comical religious performances, this song’s melancholic lyrics reflected the neither-nor social place for African Americans of his complexion. Is it possible that the lyrics, “Take me to a church and make me pray / Make me sing a song there,” even indicated that lighter-skinned African Americans were utilized for race representation with their prominent positioning in black Protestant church services as prayer leaders or vocalists? Calloway reflected a sentiment of someone who had experienced social disregard mixed with token visibility in respectable social settings, both because of his skin hue, and the final lyrics offer a prayer to God to fit within American racial categories that are as radically opposed as the religious categories of sinner and saint.

Of his racial identity, Calloway wrote, “I’ve always accepted the fact that I’m Negro. I don’t know anything else. I’ve been kicked in my ass all my life because of it, and, hell, I’ve come through it and become a star….The only difference between a black and a white entertainer is that my ass has been kicked a little more and a lot harder because it’s black.” Speaking of “nighttime integration” may have been Calloway’s method to use humor to deflect scrutiny of his perceived racial identity in his youth, given prevalent criticisms of individuals whose appearances did not comport with American racial constructs. Ultimately, Calloway confirmed his African American racial identity, and his cultural production as an entertainer was a conscious project to present traditions of African American song, dance, composition, language, and humor that reflected his life experiences. However, in an early jazz era that was not entirely distinct from minstrelsy, a lighter-complexioned African American man satirizing other African Americans and receiving support from both black consumers and an industry that white music executives, producers, managers, and club owners controlled raises some questions. Which individuals were able to profit from humor directed at darker-skinned black populations, even if these people were the intended audience for the humor? To rise in entertainment and to provide further recognition for jazz, to what degree was Calloway the beneficiary of racism because of his lighter complexion? Was Calloway perceived by white audiences as a racial intermediary, capable of interpreting African American culture, religion, and life through comical music in a manner that ultimately makes him complicit in racial stereotyping or possibly the racialized maligning of black religious habits? To what extent was his satire of African American Protestantism inherently (or inadvertently) racist? Calloway’s religious irreverence, attendant

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68 Calloway and Rollins, 42.
with racial irreverence, was a fraught cultural undertaking for which he was socially responsible as a race representative in a popular music profession.

The social circles of Calloway’s wife, Zulme “Nuffie” Calloway (née MacNeal) (1915-2008), reveal his ascent into the world of conventional African American middle-class respectability as a jazz entertainer who assumed responsibility for his cultural output. Nuffie was a Howard University graduate with a master’s degree in sociology, and she studied with the African American intellectual Alain Locke. Her previous employment included working as an assistant to then-NAACP attorney Thurgood Marshall, working as a civil servant for the Federal Housing Authority on race relations, working as a typist and researcher for social scientist Gunnar Myrdal’s influential study of race relations, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, and she was an administrative secretary in the Department of Housing when she met Calloway in 1942. One of her friends was John H. Johnson, founder of the Johnson Publishing Company, which produced *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines.69

As Nuffie recounted in her husband’s autobiography, she was raised to avoid association with popular artists like Calloway: “I was taught that show people are evil, low life, and inferior, but Mama also brought me up, as a Christian, to respect each individual as a person.” She attributed this formation to her eventual acceptance of Calloway and his band members: “So when it came down to it, and these men turned out to be loving people and gentlemen, my better instincts prevailed and all my prejudices melted.” 70 The two held different associations, however, and Nuffie recalled her husband’s apprehension to fraternizing with her friends:

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70 Calloway and Rollins, 201.
My world, the world of Washington’s Negro intellectual class, was as different for Cab as his world was for me. And he was just as intimidated by my friends as I had been by his. I tried to get him involved in the parties and functions of my group in Washington. He resisted; he didn’t like the idea of parties where the people stood around making delicate, intellectual small-talk and smoking pipes and discussing politics. Cab was a gambler, and while gentle, his natural milieu had been among rough, tough-talking, earthy folk.

In 1943, Nuffie eventually persuaded Calloway to attend a “typical D. C. Negro upper-middle-class party” with her. She recounted that at first, Calloway was drinking by himself in a corner:

But [NAACP executive secretary] Walter White and a small group of men were standing near Cab talking about racial discrimination around the country. And of course Cab had experienced some of the worst of it—his was the first major Negro band to make a great deep-South circuit. So Walter or someone asked Cab about his experiences and Cab suddenly became the authority, and boy did he open up. Before the evening was over just about every man in the place was huddled around Cab listening to his stories about traveling with a big band through the South.

They had, in effect, acknowledged Cab’s wisdom and intellect…Walter did love and respect Cab greatly, and years later, when some of the Negro organizations protested the revival of *Porgy and Bess* as demeaning to black people, Walter White spoke out most strongly that *Porgy* was a folk opera and that it should be a source of pride.

Ironically, Nuffie would have been ideal spouse for Calloway in the eyes of his mother, Martha, given her elite education, the commitments to African American progress evident in her

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71 According to her online obituary, Nuffie Calloway “held various board positions and was on many committees such as the Abbott House in Ardsley, New York, the Council for Social Services, Adoption Services of Westchester, the YWCA of White Plains, and she was president of the Marymount Mothers Club in Tarrytown, NY. She was also a member of the Northeasterns, the Links and the Continentals and was a member of the Urban League where she devoted her time to the needs of Children.” “Zulme Nuffie Calloway, August 24, 1915 – October 13, 2008.”

72 Calloway and Rollins, 202.

73 Nuffie also wrote that it was important to list the guests at this party because they were her friends who became prominent African Americans and who established friendships with her husband: “Frank Horne, Lena’s uncle, had been my boss in the Department of Housing. Cab and Frank became very close after that party. So did Judge William Hastie, who later became the governor of the Virgin Islands and dean of the Howard University Law School; and William Trent, head of the government’s racial relations department; and Abe Harris, chairman of the Department of Economics at Howard University; and Sterling Brown, of Howard’s English department; and Eugene Holmes, of Howard’s philosophy department; and Claude Barnett, founder of the Associated Negro Press and a close friend of mine from childhood; and Clarence Johnson, who headed labor relations in the race-relations section of the Department of Housing.” Calloway and Rollins, 202-203.
professional work, and her social circles. Nuffie was likely responsible for encouraging her spouse to publish his thoughts on race relations in op-eds for African American editorials, like his November 1949 contribution to the *Philadelphia Tribune*. Calloway addressed the concern of an unnamed African American who was to make a speech on “The Negro’s Place in Motion Pictures” to an African American audience. For Calloway, the place of any black person in the motion picture industry is “where he is suited. If he’s an expert cameraman, his place is behind a camera. If he’s a musician, he should be blowing a horn or leading a bland. If he’s an executive type with executive abilities, his place is as an executive.” A push for “the equality of races” should trump concerns about any singular “place” for black entertainers, and Calloway noted that the film industry was becoming cognizant of African American talents in a variety of professions:

Hollywood is learning, slowly, that a Negro actor need not necessarily play the part of a maid, Pullman porter (named George), or Zulu native. And Hollywood needs to learn a lot more about colored people. But the boys in the berets will never be educated if we are to agree that there is a “place” for the Negro in his industry.

One of the things which has made me most proud of my race is that many, many of our people have refused to admit that they were restricted in their efforts because of their color. They have fought, sidestopped [sic], ignored, or laughed at the invisible line which makes colored people different from white, red, or any other color.

They have become lawyers, doctors, scientists, executives, entertainers, sports figures, shoe clerks, bakers, designers, or any of thousands of occupations.

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74 In common with the religious race professionals discussed in the dissertation’s first chapter, Walter White’s investment in antilynching activism informed his implication of Christianity in the proliferation of anti-black racial violence. White wrote, “It is exceedingly doubtful if lynching could possibly exist under any other religion than Christianity. Not only through tacit approval and acquiescence has the Christian Church indirectly given its approval to lynch law and other forms of race prejudice, but evangelical Christian denominations have done much towards creation of the particular fanaticism which finds an outlet in lynching.” See White, *Rope and Faggot: A Biography of Judge Lynch* (New York: Knopf, 1929), 40. As Nuffie and Calloway’s social acquaintance, White was a prominent race representative who also advocated for the federal government to provide black swing bands buses to travel through the South in the 1940s. See Scott DeVeaux, *The Birth of Bebop: A Social and Musical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 243.
They have refused to believe that they had a place and because of that refusal, they have won their right to success in their endeavor.

Ultimately, Calloway hoped the nation would recognize the African American man or woman who treads into new professional territory as “an individual with a purpose and not a Negro with a ‘place.’” In these written moments, the comical musician advocated social integration in the same manner as his middle-class African American clerical contemporaries. Duke Ellington, Calloway’s contemporary, was also working to render jazz as an option among the black professional elite, while black ministers disregarded it as a vestige of the immoral and low-down, similar the blues. With many jazz entertainers, America saw the emergence of race men and women unsanctioned by African American Protestant religious leaders, institutions, or press. However, did jazz men like Calloway and elite educated black preachers have a shared object of ridicule—the hypocritical, greedy, unlettered, promiscuous preacher—because they were both working to carve out a “New Negro” professional status and claim to some prominent form of race leadership in public?

Conclusion

Cab Calloway tells of the time he sneaked into his daughter’s bedroom to hear her say her prayers before retiring. The tiny girl’s voice was barely audible and Cab interrupted with: “A little louder, dear, I can’t hear you.”

“That’s all right, daddy,” she replied. “I’m not talking to YOU!”

—Irv Kupcinet, Chicago Times

The reflections of Calloway, a jazz musician who parodied others, ultimately reveal less an urge to abstain from African American religious practice and more a consideration of “taking it easy” as a viable religious option. To enjoy religious irreverence was to trumpet one’s

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75 Cab Calloway, “Cab Thinks There’s Too Much Talk of ‘The Negro’s Place’,,” Philadelphia Tribune, November 5, 1949, 15.
76 “Pulpit and Pew,” Negro Digest vol. 4, no. 6 (April 1946), 18.
devoutness a little less, or to recognize the reality that carnal and/or material desires persisted for everyone, even those who preached “holy” living. Calloway’s jazz profession poked fun at the African American religious subjects he knew well, and his musical comedy was a form of entertainment that he found morally acceptable, given the hypocrisy he perceived to be widespread among religious folks. His anti-religious humor offered ministerial mockery, but it was an appreciative laughter for black audiences without suggesting definitive apostasy.

In terms of showmanship and combined singing and dancing talent, Calloway’s legacy is established through a lineage of black and white entertainers like James Brown, Michael Jackson, Prince, Janet Jackson, Usher, Justin Timberlake, and Chris Brown. However, several of Calloway’s performances demonstrate that he also prefigured more than five decades of twentieth-century African American entertainers who were familiar with black Protestant Christianity engaging in their own displays of religious and racial irreverence: Louis Jordan’s popular 1944 record “Deacon Jones”; Langston Hughes’s weekly short story column in the Chicago Defender from the 1940s through 1960s about Jesse B. Semple, along with his 1956 play Tambourines to Glory; Flip Wilson’s performance as “Reverend Leroy” of the “Church of What’s Happening Now” on The Flip Wilson Show in the early 1970s; Arsenio Hall’s

Yuval Taylor and Jake Austen have written on Louis Jordan’s popularity in light of his minstrel influences and affects: “By the 1940s, Jordan had become the country’s most popular black entertainer, and he did so by indulging in a variety of minstrel stereotypes, including chicken-stealing in ‘Ain’t Nobody Here But Us Chickens,’ faux dialect in ‘Is You Is Or Is You Ain’t My Baby,’ and the lazy, drinking, stealing, chicken-loving preacher in ‘Deacon Jones.’ He even recorded ‘Waiting for the Robert E. Lee’ and frequently performed preacher routines onstage. Few performers of his era so clearly reveled in the minstrel tradition, and it was one of the keys to his triumph: Jordan is still considered the greatest practitioner of the African American comic song…According to [Will] Friedwald, the key to Jordan’s success was that he ‘affectionately savage[d] all the institutions of African American life: family life, business, education (“Teacher, Teacher”), the law, and even the church.’ The minstrel tradition, like for so many others, presented Jordan (who wore immaculately tailored suits and came across in interviews as an intellectual) with an alter ego who could get crazy and unconstrained.” On Jordan’s relationship to Calloway, Taylor and Austen write that the former “…also likely patterned himself after Cab Calloway, who sang similarly comic songs and jump blues with big smiles and frenzied energy. Calloway, however, performed very few minstrel-like songs.” Yuval Taylor and Jake Austen, Darkest America: Black Minstrelsy from Slavery to Hip-Hop (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2012), 218-220.
performance as “Reverend Brown” in the 1988 film *Coming to America*; a host of stand-up comedians, represented perhaps most clearly and consistently in Rickey Smiley’s act focused on black churches and his performance on stage and radio as elderly church member “Bernice Jenkins”; and into the twenty-first century, with Aaron McGruder’s television series *Black Jesus* as well as the YouTube comedy of religious entertainers like Lexi Allen and The Playmakers, as shown in Allen’s “Things Black Folk Say at a Funeral” and The Playmakers’ “How to Shout in a Black Church.”

In his 1977 study of African American folk thought and culture, Lawrence Levine concluded that the proliferation of African American jokes about religious subjects and institutions was evidence of “[t]he decline of the sacred world view” in the twentieth century. This decline corresponded with an increase in critical perspectives toward religious leaders and a secularizing distancing of religious life from non-religious mundane affairs as its own sphere of social existence. However, in the long twentieth century and into the twenty-first, irreverent humor has persisted alongside the evolution of African American Christianity, in its Protestant, Pentecostal, Catholic, and nondenominational forms (and African American Protestant preachers have also employed humor in their sermons). The inherent risk of making a sacred cow humorous, in Calloway’s case, by making fun of African American religious practices, was that

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Levine wrote, “The substantial anger blacks felt at the hypocrisy and dishonesty of the ‘respectable’ world around them was projected onto the figure of the black minister, whose lofty pretensions were constantly pictured as being undermined by his compulsive lust for chicken, liquor, money, and women….Twentieth-century black humor did not aim its sharp criticism at any single denomination, however, but at the very message and efficacy of religion itself.” Concerning the enduring presence of black religious life in the face of irreverent humor, Levine maintained his black secularization thesis: “No matter how negative its tone might become, Negro humor concerning preachers and religion, by its very ubiquity, indicated that they remained a force in Afro-American life. We have scant cause to laugh at those matters which no longer affect us. But the laughter contained other meanings as well. There was still affect and indeed there was still affection, but there was also increasing distance and growing perspective. Black humor reinforces the conclusions arrived at in earlier chapters: the church and its leaders were becoming a distinct area increasingly apart from the regular ebb and flow of life.” See Lawrence J. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Pres, 1977), 326-330.
this satire occupied popular American imaginations at a time when middle-class African Americans with “modern” religious attitudes and practices were also forging a progressive sociopolitical project predicated upon the ideology that whites must perceive and accept them as modern and respectable religious people.

If, on the one hand, black Protestants bore modern anxieties over their religious customs being lampooned as perpetually antiquated, simple-minded, hypocritical, or economically poor, did religious irreverence compel them to resolve to produce innovative religious traditions to suit new theological, musical, sermonic, and class tastes? In short, was African American religious humor partially responsible for African American religious innovations? On the other hand, did religiously irreverent humor produce cultural nostalgia, a form of shared humor about identifiable experiences that encouraged continued engagement with black Protestant religious practices? Additionally, did black churchgoers commit to attending these spaces (and to bringing along their children) so that they might encounter traditional elements like chanted sermons and ecstatic worship in order to establish or maintain cultural ties, as African Americans moved between rural, urban, suburban, and exurban sites in the twentieth century? It is a fruitful scholarly pursuit to consider whether African American Christians who embraced some measure of religious irreverence were responsible for fostering subsequent generations of African Americans who appreciated modern religious innovations while also embracing levity about the presumed moral invincibility of those appearing to exude holiness or piety.

I strongly suspect that there are more criticisms of African American religion that have come through forms of African American comedy, and the search for articulations of religious disenchantment, disaffection, or strident anti-religious stances in African American culture must incorporate or center the perspectives of entertainers employing comedy founded in religious
familiarity. Calloway’s music certainly did not introduce wholly new criticisms to black Protestantism, for in the first half of the twentieth century, prominent black religious and non-religious leaders like W.E.B. Du Bois, Nannie Helen Burroughs, Asa Philip Randolph, and E. Franklin Frazier leveled criticisms, often employing wit and irreverence, at black Protestant beliefs and practices at the same time that these institutions invited them into their middle-class pulpits and parishioners provided shouts of “Amen!” to their criticisms. As historian of African American religion Barbara Savage has written, the popular criticisms of African American Protestant churches that “focus[ed] uncomfortably and narrowly on parasitic preachers, religious primitivism, and ignorant parishioners” masked broader, more complex, and shifting critiques of those actors and institutions, “sometimes the religious leadership, sometimes the church members, sometimes the hypocrisy and racism of white Christianity, and sometimes the conservatism and passivity of black Christianity.”

Generations of black religious audiences had already been well primed for popular public criticism, and the resulting tradition of entertaining religious irreverence, importantly, has often been enjoyed by faithful participants in black institutional religious life as well as those who swear off churches and their perceived or experienced hypocrisies. Ultimately, Calloway himself maintained divine belief despite his aversion to regular church attendance. For him and many others, God and life’s carnal pleasures were both worthy of affirmation and celebration, while there may have been multiple dimensions for practicing, consuming, and enjoying African American Protestantism.

Preachers, and musicians like Calloway, are both professional performers. They may perform nostalgia for audiences, by singing songs that evoke their audience’s memories of childhood in both contexts, or adopting older and familiar dialects, colloquialisms, sayings, anecdotes, and metaphors. In the professional jazz arena, nostalgia also operated to elevate the African American folk religious sensibilities that often provided comical fodder for Calloway’s musical productions. In examining Duke Ellington’s compositions that signify black racial and religious identity and history, the next chapter presents black middle-class Protestant men and women in the early twentieth century who offered narratives of a sacralized African history and a racialized biblical past through popular culture and practice.
Chapter Three
“Royal Ancestry”: The African Roots of Racial Righteousness

Figure 3.1. Album covers for *Black, Brown and Beige; The Liberian Suite;* and *The Afro-Eurasian Eclipse.*
Performed by Duke Ellington and his Orchestra.
“He looked up at the sky and it seemed to say:  
Boola, look at the sun, you’re not alone.  
How warm and friendly it has ever been.  
Do you need more than other men to comfort you?

Look, now, is this not the same golden sun  
Which fired your brain along the calm Euphrates?  
And smiled upon your seeking, searching sorties  
As you followed the course of the Ganges  
Absorbing here poetic, soaring folklore,  
Leaving there a part of you...a rhythmic song?  
Yes, it’s the same. The same old sun which smiled  
Upon you as you pushed along the Nile and planted  
Seeds. Seeds of the first civilization  
Known to man!  
Drink them in...their glowing stories  
Of Babylon and all her glories  
Knowing well her culture sprang  
From black men. Forgotten long ago...Meroë...  
From whence the first bright light flamed up  
In Ethiopia to guide mankind along the way.”

—Duke Ellington, “Black” manuscript text

Introduction

Edward Kennedy “Duke” Ellington (1899-1974) grew up in Washington, D.C.’s black middle class at the turn of the twentieth century, and his mother took him to at least two churches every Sunday (Nineteenth Street Baptist and John Wesley A. M. E. Zion, his father’s family church). The young Duke Ellington was educated in an environment that saw the staging of historical plays and pageants by civic groups, schools, and churches. According to music historian Mark Tucker, Washington, D.C. and other American cities saw pageants such as W. E. B. Du Bois’s The Star of Ethiopia, which purported to cover “10,000 years of the history of the Negro race and its work and suffering and triumphs in the world.” These pageants began with a

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conception of black world history inaugurated by a classical, African period. This classical Africa, a civilizational analogue to ancient Greek and Roman civilizations for whites in the modern Western world, contained the histories of Egypt and Ethiopia and extended to African American life at the start of the twentieth century. Other pageants, such as *The Evolution of the Negro in Picture, Song, and Story*, similarly encouraged musical and visual dramas that captured a history of an African American slavery that produced “sorrow songs” (a form of spirituals that transition from somber themes of despair to themes of hope and joy), outlined Emancipation and the socioeconomic promises of Reconstruction, and concluded with the present “Day of Opportunity.”

Scholar of African American literature Christine R. Gray wrote of these pageants’ participatory value for African American communities: “Making costumes, painting sets, posting notices, practicing musical or choral scores, researching the characters and history portrayed, and working on stage and backstage…those participating were closely involved not only communally but also culturally, intellectually, and emotionally, for the history to be presented was *theirs*…” In his memoir, Ellington’s reflections on his early education in African American history reveal an early-twentieth-century culture of instilling racial pride through programs crafting artistic, historical narratives of African American social progress:

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3 In his study of Afrocentric thought, Wilson Jeremiah Moses defines Egyptocentrism as “the sometimes sentimental, at other times cynical, attempt to claim ancient Egyptian ancestry for black Americans. It involves the attempt to reconstruct the peoples of ancient Egypt in terms of traditional American racial perceptions.” Egyptocentrist African American thinkers and writers promoted a “heroic monumentalism” in their construction of African history, and this history is “vindicational” in its emphases on “…the spectacular past and monumental contributions of the ancient civilizations of the Nile, including Ethiopia, Egypt, and Meroe. Black writers of the nineteenth century, including Samuel Ringgold Ward, William Wells Brown, and Fredrick Douglass all claimed the ties of African Americans to the builders of Ancient Egypt. J. W. C. Pennington began the practice of identifying the civilizations of the eastern Mediterranean and Tigris-Euphrates with an ancient Negroid race, a tradition maintained in the 1940s by Drusilla Dunjee Houston.” See Moses, *Afrotopia: The Roots of African American Popular History* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 6, 23-24.


When we went out into the world, we would have the grave responsibility of being practically always on stage, for every time people saw a Negro they would go into a reappraisal of the race. ... [A]s representatives of the Negro race we were to command respect for our people. This being an all-colored school, Negro history was crammed into the curriculum, so that we would know our people all the way back.\(^6\)

Don George (1909-1987), a lyricist for Ellington in the 1940s, wrote that Ellington “musicalized” African American history. The first two decades of his career saw conscious attempts to assert an appreciation for blackness in songs like “Black and Tan Fantasy” (1927), “Symphony in Black” (1934), “Black Butterfly” (1936), “Black Beauty” (1938), and in Black, Brown and Beige (1943), Ellington’s extended symphonic “tone parallel to the history of the Negro in America” (see figure 3.1). George recalled how Ellington often shared with him notable African American milestones:

Duke was tremendously well versed in black history. He told me about the invasion of Africa by Portugal, shortly after Columbus discovered the New World, when the Portuguese set up the slave system as we knew it. He told me about Crispus Attucks, a black [sic] who was the first casualty of the Boston Massacre; about the underground railroad that smuggled slaves to the North during the Civil War; about Harriet Beecher Stowe. He made me aware of Marcus Garvey and George Washington Carver.\(^7\)

For Ellington and many other African Americans, to know and herald black history in the Americas was to invest oneself in a sacred racial narrative that extended into the African continent’s ancient past. But as a sacred racial narrative, this history incorporated biblical narratives that black Protestants read as confirmation of their racial pride and contributions to humanity’s history. This chapter explores popular forms of scriptural interpretation—the ways that African American Protestants in the twentieth century’s early decades read the Hebrew and


Christian scriptures and constructed their history as descendants of the African continent—that formed the early religious context that Ellington represented through his jazz compositions. Ellington brought into his musical profession a relation to the Bible as a sacred African document, a tale of African and black people as the great founders of ancient civilizations and as contributors to the foundation for modern civilization.

Biblical scriptures chronicled a sacred racial history both directly and indirectly, in the process revealing that middle-class black Protestants, along with black academics who were invested in the study of ancient North Africa, the Near East, and East Africa, had two objectives: racializing sacred Hebrew figures, and sacralizing non-Hebrew peoples as venerable contributors to the development of religion through both mono- and polytheisms. Historian of African American religion Craig Prentiss has noted that even for Carter G. Woodson’s effort to construct and disseminate a narrative of “Negro history” in the early twentieth century, “…not only redeeming the message of Christianity but rehabilitating the African characters of biblical narrative from the clutches of European and Euro-American exploitative exegesis made common cause with the task of educating African Americans about their noble ancestry.”8 By publishing and promoting books on history and biblical interpretation, writing editorials, answering reader questions in regular black press columns, staging pageants, and even through long- and short-form jazz compositions, African Americans disseminated a message of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures as texts revealing an African history that encompassed the earliest Hebrews and Christians. Importantly, this work reveals a tradition of African American Protestant Christians incorporating African ancestors beyond Hebrew and Christian traditions in their reverence.

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Ellington at mid-century, in particular, this racialized reading of the Bible and sacralized reading of African history implied an essentially “classical” religious nature for African Americans, and the musical works over his career promoted a complex representation of African American history that appreciatively wedded his folk’s sacred and “sinful” practices. As Ellington wrote in the “Beige” manuscript section for his *Black, Brown and Beige* composition, “Harlem! For all her moral lurches / Has always had / LESS cabarets than churches!”

This chapter’s first section examines the Harlem Renaissance conceptions of African American folk culture in which Ellington’s musical ideas of racial identity and history formed. The second section explores African American Protestant cultural practices of racializing scriptures and constructing narratives that made the ancient African world sacred. The third section engages Ellington’s “Come Sunday” to situate his representations of the history of African American religious fidelity within broader racially essentialist concepts of black belief, followed by an overview of some Ellington compositions reflecting his complicated appraisal of the West African past.

**Renaissance-era Cultural Politics**

In the 1920s, the Harlem Renaissance represented a form of “cultural politics” that relied on the celebration and proliferation of popular African American artistic production. This form of cultural politics represented a novel, alternative strategy for racial progress in contrast to the established, Du Boisian sociological and political programs of national organizations (such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), which often produced generalizations about areas of African American culture, like religion, in the pursuit of substantive social policy changes. Du Bois published *The Philadelphia Negro* in 1899 as a

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9 “Black, Brown and Beige.”
response to his fellow University of Pennsylvania faculty, who asked that he prove, “on an academic basis,” that African Americans were responsible for the “bad government, prostitution, and criminality” in Philadelphia. Most black Philadelphians lived in the city’s seventh ward, and Du Bois collected data on their living conditions and habits over the next fifteen months. Du Bois’s specific findings on African American church cultures were linked to an historical assessment of African American religion in America in his 1900 essay “The Religion of the American Negro.” In this essay, Du Bois asserted a natural religiosity for African Americans in attempting to explain the mass acceptance of Christianity by enslaved Africans and their descendants. Du Bois stated, “The Negro has already been pointed out many times as a religious animal—a being of that deep emotional nature which turns instinctively toward the supernatural. Endowed with a rich tropical imagination and a keen, delicate appreciation of Nature, the transplanted African lived in a world animate with gods and devils, elves and witches.” Du Bois made this historical case to then assert that there was a new type of African American, living in northern cities, who signaled the end of the older, naturally religious type who held onto the “vague superstitions” of an African past (and this latter type was to be found among “unlettered” African Americans, mostly in the South). This new, more cynical African American in northern cities left the churches for gambling halls and enjoyed the more “sensual” vices in addition to criminality. ¹⁰

Stressing the idea that a different cultural character was developing in the urban North than what he observed in rural black religious communities, Du Bois’s characterization of religion in the South was fleshed out most famously in The Souls of Black Folk in 1903,

primarily in the chapter “Of the Faith of the Fathers.” It was in rural religious spirituals and ecstatic religious practices (which he termed “the frenzy” in his study of a Christian revival service) that Du Bois essentialized a religious character for African Americans. Spirituals—religious songs created by black slaves—were “the most original and beautiful expression of human life and longing yet born on American soil.” These songs came from “African forests, where [their] counterpart can still be heard,” and the “tragic soul-life” of American slavery shaped their contemporary content as “the one true expression of a people’s sorrow, despair, and hope.”11

Du Bois’s sociological outlines of the condition of African Americans in the North and South—the North representing black cynicism and vice with its loss of “religion” as the superstitious and ecstatic, the Southern blacks capturing that “authentic” religiosity—served a definite political purpose: the highlighting of social conditions, the types of human beings these social conditions produced, and their prospects for fuller incorporation into American civilization. Social change, for Du Bois, would elevate African Americans in the South beyond a reliance on unenlightened forms of religion and curb the urban immoralities of northern African Americans, for both were pathologies—in Du Bois’s mind—stemming from the history of slavery and of living amid Jim Crow inequality. By treating African American religion as a subject of academic inquiry, Du Bois inaugurated a tradition of study that challenged sociology’s sole dependence on “empirical” observations of people and subsequent analysis by incorporating their cultural productivity into discussions of social policy. According to his autobiography, Du Bois committed to the collection of facts for formulating public policy while vested in African American social justice: “I was going to study the facts, any and all facts, concerning the

American Negro and his plight, and by measurement and comparison and research, work up to any valid generalizations which I could. “12

With their focus on culture, Harlem Renaissance artists, writers, and musicians also signified traditions such as African American spirituals as Du Bois had in *The Souls of Black Folk*. Eric Porter writes, “Du Bois’s treatment of this form of music anticipated future debates by situating music at the nexus of race and nation, by emphasizing the realm of spirit as a site of black achievement, and by simultaneously theorizing black musical culture as a gift to American society and as a vehicle for African American liberation.”13 Harlem Renaissance artists insisted that all black cultural production essentially signaled black artistic brilliance. For these “New Negro” artists in the supposedly immoral, urban North, culture could be signified anew in the 1920s as the elements of a folk’s historical resilience. Consequently, they conveyed to the wider society a “classical” portrait of African American religious beliefs and practices.

The practice of framing cultural elements such as the spirituals as classical was not unique to 1920s New York—artists such as Duke Ellington entered Harlem’s musical scene with well-established narratives of African American history. Ellington arrived in Harlem in 1923 formed by a family and class of African Americans who viewed racial uplift as a professional duty. According to Mark Tucker, the Ellington who matured as an artist in the 1930s fit perfectly Alain Locke’s jazz archetype: “...Ellington came to embody the ideals of the New Negro artist in his dignified manner and cultivated persona, his social consciousness, his use of vernacular sources as the basis for original compositions, and his deep pride in the Afro-

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American heritage.”

Ellington articulated the social importance of his music as representative of a racial and cultural experience, in addition to its emblematic representation of what it meant to be an American citizen. Duke Ellington’s consistent rhetorical appreciation of his music as essential “Negro folk music” also allowed him to present jazz as an important vehicle for a romanticized concept of African American religious history. His “classical” musical portrait of African American Christianity was necessarily a depiction of racialized religiosity confined mainly to the past in service to the Harlem Renaissance project of addressing social inequality without recourse to political advocacy. However, it was others within African American Protestantism who fostered this view of their race’s ancient religious history that cultural producers like Ellington promoted.


“God honored the black man by allowing some of his Ethiopian blood to flow in the veins of His only Son Jesus Christ, and I unhesitatingly assert that Jesus would in America be classed a NEGRO.”


Ellington came from and participated in a black Protestant culture that signified African countries such as Egypt and Ethiopia as ancient examples of mighty and formidable black

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14 Tucker, 112. Music scholar John Howland notes that Alain Locke wrote The Negro and His Music in 1936 about jazz in a hierarchical categorization: “cheap low-browed jazz” was the mediocre, manufactured music for popular consumption; “worthwhile jazz” was the realm of instrumental virtuosos and jazz composers; and “classical jazz” was home to “a type of music that successfully transposes the elements of...jazz idioms...[to] more sophisticated...musical forms.” Such so-called classical jazz consisted of African American composers who could employ racial folk idioms in music while writing in “nonracial” classical forms. For Locke, Duke Ellington was the artistic exemplar of “worthwhile jazz” and the sole musician among the major jazz artists of the era who might achieve Locke’s ideal, “classical jazz” form. See Howland, “Ellington Uptown”: Duke Ellington, James P. Johnson, and the Birth of Concert Jazz (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 55–56; and Alain Locke, The Negro and His Music (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, Inc., 1968), 94–98.

civilizations, a people who traced the racial lineage of African-descended peoples throughout the Hebrew Bible. In 1958, Ellington had the opportunity to meet with Queen Elizabeth II and offered to compose “a real royal suite” for her. The Queen’s Suite, by Ellington and his co-composer and arranger Billy Strayhorn in 1959, consisted of six movements, one of which bore the title “Apes and Peacocks.” The title comes from a verse in the Hebrew Bible, 1 Kings 10:22b (“Once every three years the fleet of ships of Tarshish used to come bringing gold, silver, ivory, apes, and peacocks.”), and Ellington wrote that this song “was inspired by reading the Bible about the Queen of Sheba and all the gifts she brought to King Solomon.” When the English jazz historian Stanley Dance asked Ellington the significance of this title, Ellington instructed him to “reread the Old and New Testaments.”

Ellington participated in a narrative of African American history that signified many biblical characters such as the Queen of Sheba as Ethiopian and the Hebrew King Solomon as the presumed descendant of dark-skinned Ethiopians, and the present Ethiopian monarchy attests to this belief in their claim that Solomon and the Queen of Sheba produced a son together who founded the ancient Ethiopian empire. One earlier Ellington composition in 1941, titled “Menelik, the Lion of Judah,” revealed the composer’s celebration of Menelik II, the late-nineteenth-century Ethiopian emperor believed to be one such descendant of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. Ellington later reiterated the concept of Solomon’s blackness in his final composition, The Three Black Kings (Les Trois Rois Noirs) in 1974, completed by his son, jazz trumpeter Mercer Ellington, for jazz band and symphony orchestra and scored for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater by Luther

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Henderson, Jr. The suite’s three movements are named for different black royalty: “King Balthazar” (a name for one of the biblical Magi/Wise Men who visited the infant Jesus and who is considered black), “King Solomon,” and “Martin Luther King, Jr.” The selection of biblical characters, titles, and themes for his jazz compositions represents one of Ellington’s practices for advertising—overtly or with subtlety—his intention to create music that was both beautiful and racially inspiring.

Civilization’s Black Foundation

Black religious leaders and academics provided African Americans with approaches to racializing Hebrew and Christian scriptures, establishing narratives and arguments that informed the reproduction of this ideology through cultural and artistic production. James Morris Webb, a Seattle-based “Evangelist of the Church of God,” published The Black Man, The Father of Civilization, Proven by Biblical History initially in 1910, a text he designed as a supplemental guide for African Americans studying the scriptures. Webb proclaimed his profession as “a Minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ” who did not have “malice and hatred or any ill feeling toward my white brethren” in authoring this text that, instead, represented both “that meek and

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20 Webb wrote, “To appreciate my argument, the reader had best have a Bible at his finger tips so as to examine my references and compare them with my statements, which I make wholly and solely upon the authorities found in the Bible, which in turn is the real and only authority on ancient history (again my authority is not inspired in the slightest degree with malice or hatred for the white race).” Webb, 3-4.
humble spirit” of true Christian commitment and “a gigantic pride in my race, which I hope, pleases God.”

Webb’s approach to racializing biblical accounts as African history in *The Black Man* started from a position of regarding the Hebrew and Christian scriptures as historically authoritative, naming the Bible as providing “the first and only true account of the origin of mankind.” According to Webb, the Bible was “a dispassionate record of man’s creation and progress, untrimmed, unshaped, and unvarnished, to suit prejudice” that charted humankind’s progress toward civilization. What made the Bible a “complete record” was that it also revealed “the origin of the black man” and confirmed that he was “the father of civilization.”

The Bible, then, served Webb as a text African-descended peoples were to read to uncover the original race responsible for civilization—its principal purpose went beyond the unveiling of a salvation history through the New Testament’s life and ministry of Jesus. Because of Egypt’s importance as a civilization that Webb wanted African Americans to claim with pride, his reading of the Bible even went beyond the existing black Protestant tradition that cherished the theological comparison of Israelite enslavement and freedom from Egypt to black enslavement in the United States, which situates the latter nations in each narrative primarily as antagonists. And in the case of reading the Book of Revelations as portending future events, Webb related African American enslavement and oppression to the American government as one of the “beasts” that John of Patmos beheld.

21 Webb, 4.
22 Webb, 5.
23 Webb wrote, “In reading Revelation, 13th Chapter, 11th verse, of St. John, the Divine, I am very much impressed by the description of one of his revelations which God unfolded to him, and which he describes as follows: ‘I behold another beast coming up out of the earth and he had two horns, like lamb’s, and he spake like a dragon.’ Now, to my mind, the foregoing vision of St. John the Divine, was this very country, the United States of America, revealed to him ages ago before this country was discovered and named, the two horns I interpret to be the two political parties, that have done so much to corrupt this Government and misrule its people from their infancy to the present day. Again,
Webb set out early in *The Black Man* to undermine the notion of the Curse of Ham (more specifically, Noah’s curse of Ham’s son Canaan), which rendered black skin a sign of God’s disfavor in popular interpretations of the Bible’s constructions of racial history. Canaan fathered “seven prosperous nations, foremost among them were the Canaanites, Phoenicians and Sidonians.” Webb stated that King Solomon built his temple with the labor of the Sidonians, “‘black men’ [who] were the only men possessed with anywhere near sufficient skill to take charge of and successfully complete the artistic timber work on ‘His’ Solomon’s temple.” Webb referenced 1 Kings 5:6 for this assertion and concluded that “Solomon knew the black race was a superior, not an inferior race.”

Webb offered a larger conclusion that the very idea of efficacious human curses was incompatible with biblical scriptures, because these ancient, non-Hebrew black peoples not only participated in the construction of sacred places critical to biblical history but also represented God’s gifts as civilizations in their own right.

This chapter section’s epigraph illustrates Webb’s stance on the heritage of Jesus, whom Webb believed “will have His head covered with woolly hair when he comes to judge the world,” according to Daniel 7:9-10. Contemporary portraits of Christ bore “an erroneous conception of Him, by the artists,” by neglecting to depict his woolly hair and a darker skin color. Jesus descended from the tribe of Judah, whose wives (the daughter of Shua, and Tamar) were descendants of Canaan, “a black man who was the son of Ham (Genesis 10th ch. 6th v.).” Webb located Mary, the mother of Jesus, in the lineage of Judah, and he referenced the American Government spake like a dragon when it permitted slavery to exist, especially when its Constitution says, “That ALL MEN WERE BORN FREE AND EQUAL.” Webb, 33.

24 Webb, 5-6.
25 Webb claimed, “Viewing the progress of the immediate descendants of Ham we learn that a curse laid upon one by a mortal of that day was as foolish and ineffective as it is in this, the story about this curse, also the story of the black man who contended that a black skin and woolly hair is a disgrace, has, according to the Bible, no foundation.” Webb, 7.
26 Webb, 8.
Jesus as the “seed of David” (according to Romans 1-3), thereby proclaiming that Jesus descended from another noteworthy biblical character “who had Negro blood in his veins” due to descent from Ham and Canaan (see figure 3.2). And the story of Jesus’ birth was significant to Webb for Egypt’s role in sheltering the infant Jesus from Herod’s infanticide decree.

Beyond an African heritage for the Christian savior, Webb signified the heritage of Jethro, the Midianite priest whose daughter Zipporah married Moses, as “the Ethiopian or Negro father-in-law of Moses” who “gave Moses the foundation of what is today our system of graded courts for pronouncing judgments” according to Exodus 18. The Egyptian upbringing of Moses was also significant because of “Pharaoh’s daughter,” the black woman who raised him, and because of his Egyptian education. Consequently, the examples of contemporary black male educational leaders like Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois, and W. S. Scarborough should not seem novel to African American readers of the Bible, for these men were “descended from fathers who ruled Egypt centuries ago and with their great wisdom layed [sic] the foundation of learning.”

Webb concluded *The Black Man* anticipating that when God summoned humankind at the end of time, the black man “will be found heading the line” and will hear from God, “Well done, thou good and faithful black servant, thou, My instrument, the Father of Civilization,” a modified version of Matthew 25:21 and 23. Following this conclusion to the book were various endorsements, evidence of the mainstream appeal for Webb’s readings of scripture

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27 Webb, 10-11.
28 Webb wrote, “It is impossible for God to forget that the black man and his land (Egypt) was the cradle of rescue that rocked and nursed the Son of God in his first two years of life, when Herod’s decree to destroy all children under two years of age was issued. It was known that the decree was issued for the express and only purpose of destroying the infant Christ, but God chose Egypt, the black man’s land, as a haven of rest and safety during the life of the displeased and would-be infant murderer, Herod. (Matt., 2nd Chapter.)” Webb, 35.
30 Webb, 35-36.
among prominent black Protestants, including an undated letter from AME Bishop Henry McNeal Turner extolling “Elder Webb” and the lectures that produced this book. 31 Webb also included an undated comment from the Seattle Daily Times which held the racial heritages of Israel’s wisest ruler and the Christian messiah as Webb’s most significant assertions:

The evidence submitted by Elder Webb tending to prove that the Saviour of mankind was a black man seems to be sufficient to put those who oppose the proposition upon their proof. Now that the chain of evidence presented by Mr. Webb appears so complete, it is strange that none of the delvers in the Biblical records have not [sic] advanced the sensational proposition before. Not only was

31 “To Whom It May Concern: / I beg to say, after hearing Elder Webb on the subject, that the blood of the Negro coursed through the veins of Jesus and Solomon. I am frank to say that I have seldom, if ever, enjoyed such an intellectual treat. The position he assumed as the subject of his lecture touching the Hametic [sic] blood and race is difficult and requires a practical knowledge of Biblical and historical lore. But I am pleased to say that he not only shows himself an expert, but the master of the situation, and I commend him to the ministry and churches of our race of every denomination. / Truly, / Bishop H. M. Turner.”  Webb, 37.
Christ a Negro, but it seems that Solomon, who has been held up through all of
the ages as the personification of wisdom, had Ethiopian blood in his veins
also.—Seattle Daily Times.\textsuperscript{32}

Webb’s \textit{The Black Man}, along with his 1919 tract \textit{A Black Man Will Be the Coming Universal
King Proved by Biblical Prophecy}, represented influential approaches to scriptural interpretation
among Garveyites.\textsuperscript{33} However, Webb’s work likely resonated among black Protestants, beyond
the evidence of clerical endorsements, given that he produced a race record sermon titled “Moses
Was Rescued By A Negro Woman” to preach his theological content from \textit{The Black Man}
employing the popular three-minute phonograph format.\textsuperscript{34}

The 1924 pageant “Ethiopia at the Bar of Justice” by Edward J. McCoo, pastor of St.
Paul AME Church in Lexington, Kentucky from 1926 to 1942, participated as well in the
dissemination of popular black Protestant Ethiopian narratives.\textsuperscript{35} McCoo presented this pageant
with the help of John R. Hawkins, former professor of mathematics and business manager at
North Carolina’s Kittrell College as well as former education secretary and financial secretary
for the AME denomination.\textsuperscript{36} “Ethiopia” was one of the main characters in McCoo’s play, and
she represented the transhistorical presence of Africans in world history as well as her more
explicit presences in scripture. “Opposition” represented the principal antagonistic voice or
spirit in this pageant, responding to Ethiopia’s apparent advancement over time and demanding

\textsuperscript{32} Webb, 38.


of “Justice” that Ethiopia receive judgment because “[s]he is doing too much; she is becoming too ambitious; she is flying too high; [Justice] must clip her wings.” The character named “History” attested to Ethiopia’s esteem from other nations: “Ethiopia reigned upon the throne of Egypt for many years; to Ethiopia is Egypt indebted for much of her early civilization; in Egypt Ethiopia built many monuments, which still exist…Homer sings the praises of Ethiopia, calls her blameless, and the favorite of the gods.” History relays the Ethiopian heritage of the Cushite king Tirhakah, who aided the Hebrews against the Assyrians (according to Isaiah 37:9 and 2 Kings 19:9). When Justice calls the character “First Slave” before him, McCoo’s writing extols this character’s perduring theism, simultaneously disregarding and rationalizing (in appreciative language) its non-Christian and non-monotheistic forms in West African traditional religions: “I am the First Slave brought from Africa to this land, where sorrow and despair have been my portion. Opposition lured me here and has continually dogged my steps. In my primitive home, my morals were pure. Opposition corrupted them. All that Opposition could purloin she robbed me of, but my faith in God she could not dethrone; I overcame at last.” McCoo made his pageant available to African American performers of all ages, most likely within black Protestant religious congregations among other community organizations, for 25 cents per copy.

Citing the claim of French Egyptologist Gaston Maspero, George Wells Parker (1882-1931) provided African American readers an argument in his 1918 booklet The Children of the Sun against those he considered armchair scholars who asserted that Egyptians “must have been

37 Richardson, 350-351.
38 Richardson, 356.
39 Richardson, 358.
40 Richardson, 345.
something other than African” because of their religious resemblances to other ancient nations. Parker regarded “[t]he old idea of man having been created in the image of his Maker” as a universal religious trait that was indicative of a people’s gods being “ever representative of their worshippers.” Therefore, it was reasonable to conclude that black depictions of Egyptian gods indicated a black worshipping populace and, moreover, it was unreasonable to ignore that this ancient civilization envisioned a high god whose skin color and features proudly reflected their own:

Therefore when M. Maspero informs us in his inestimable work upon the Egyptian religion that Osiris, the supreme god of Egypt, was “beautiful of face, but with a dull, black complexion,” it is by no means improbable to conclude that his color is an index to the color of his worshippers. If, then, the black skin was in any way despicable to the old Egyptians; if men of that color were known to them only as servants and slaves; if they themselves were white-skinned Libyans or yellow-skinned Semites, it will be difficult to persuade a fair-minded people that the Egyptians would so far depart from the ideals and traditions of their race as to give Negro features and a black skin to the personification of the highest conception of the human mind—that infinite and unfathomable power that rules omnipotent to all men and gods, whose empire encompasses the earth and seas, the eternal stars and everlasting suns, and stretches to the uttermost confines of this mighty universe!41

Parker viewed the Egyptian and Canaanite peoples surrounding the biblical exodus tale as the African or black races that likely mixed with the Semitic Hebrews over the centuries: “The legend that Israel was in bondage in Egypt for five hundred years would presuppose that considerable mixture took place, but surely if it had not done so, it did so after the Israelites came to their promised land, Canaan. Here was another nation almost purely African and among them the Hebrews made their home.” The evidence for the black wives of Moses and other biblical figures was sufficient to infer widespread ethnic mixing, for “what the greatest men did is but an

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index to what others might have done.” And beyond the exodus narrative, Parker noted that the Hebrews’ “chief god, Jahve,” chastised the people for “associating too intimately with the black trash of the neighborhood,” with King Solomon even “go[ing] so far as to forsake the gods of Israel for the gods of Canaan” by building temples for the latter group of deities.42

Published writings like Parker’s The Children of the Sun, which examined different ethnicities in the Exodus narrative and insisted on the reliability of these scripture passages for promoting positive racial narratives, also impacted the dramas that Harlem Renaissance playwrights created for black audiences. “Graven Images” was a 1929 play for eighth grade students by May Miller (1899-1995), a theologically liberal member of Washington D.C.’s Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church and daughter of Kelly Miller. May Miller’s play dramatized the adolescent life of Eliezer, the son of Moses and Zipporah, whom Moses’s sister Miriam mistreats for his dark complexion. “Graven Images” is based on the story of Miriam’s curse in Numbers 12:1-16—wherein her skin becomes whitened through leprosy after God hears her and Aaron speaking against Moses “because of the Cushite woman whom he had married”—and Miller’s drama attributes this curse to color prejudice against Eliezer and racial or ethnic prejudice against Zipporah. Miller presents a theme that Eliezer’s blackness results from his creation in God’s image, and as historian of African American religion Craig Prentiss notes, Miller’s play held social value for African American performers in churches, schools, and colleges: “By casting Miriam as a representative of white supremacy, complete with modern concerns of so-called miscegenation, ‘blood purity,’ and fear of ‘contamination’ through the

42 Parker, 20.
dilution of ‘whiteness’ as it came to be imagined, Miller’s African American audiences were reassured not only of their worth but of God’s favor as well.”

Parker, one of the founders of the Hamitic League of the World, also produced an Associated Negro Press column, “Questions and Answers in Negro History,” which solicited correspondence from the black press’s readership—and Parker even offered to respond personally to questions involving longer replies if those readers enclosed return postage. African American religious papers like *The Star of Zion* carried Parker’s column in 1925, a fact that revealed the interest of African American readers in the histories of ancient civilizations linked to biblical narratives. “Mrs. A D. F.” asked Parker, “Was the Queen of Sheba a Negro and where was Sheba?” Parker responded that the Queen of Sheba “was of Ethiopian blood and a Negro according to modern usage of the word.” J. M. Patterson asked for the distance between Sheba and Solomon’s Temple, and Parker replied that the ancient city, “ruled by Ethiopians,” lay “about 1,500 miles from Jerusalem.” Parker also assured F. R. T. of Chicago that St. Augustine “was a Negro” born in Africa “as were many others of the early Christian prelates.”

Parker fielded questions from African Americans who disagreed with portrayals of ancient Egyptians in popular culture. G. W. W. of Chicago wrote to Parker, “I have recently seen the Ten Commandments, by DeMille, and in this picture the Egyptians are represented as white,” asking Parker how he accounted for this racial (mis)representation. Parker replied that

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43 Prentiss, 112, 149-151.
45 Parker continued, “Sheba was a country on the eastern coast of Arabia and in the province of Yemen. Yemen was founded and populated by Ethiopians. The present name of the country is Saba.” George Wells Parker, “Questions and Answers in Negro History,” *The Star of Zion*, April 2, 1925, 5.
this was “[s]imply that the American subverts the truth to his own devices” and that the consensus among contemporary Egyptologists was “that the Egyptians were Negroid and that those of the Upper Nile were wholly black.” D. B. N. of Kansas City asked Parker if Jesus was “of African blood,” to which Parker replied that the New Testament’s genealogy of Jesus confirmed his ancestry, in contrast to the “forgery” of popular depictions of Christ with “blue eyes and blonde hair.” Parker did not respond exclusively to questions concerning Christian religious history, and The Star of Zion included his response to F. G. N. of Alton, IL on the veracity of claiming that “black scholars composed the Koran.” Parker identified Abu Bekr [sic] as “a full-blooded Negro, a rich merchant of Arabia and the keeper of the records of his tribe” who preserved Mohammad’s sayings. For the readers of Parker’s syndicated column, including the clergy who edited The Star of Zion, pride for an African past transcended denominational religious commitments.

Concepts of a black or non-white Jesus endured in the black press in following decades. In preparation for Easter in 1924, the Sunday School Publishing Board of the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A. offered scripts of Willa A. Townsend’s “‘Because He Lives’: A Drama of The Resurrection” for 15 cents per copy. The black Baptist churches that purchased these dramas were able to witness congregants—and in particular, their “ambitious young people”—performing “…the trial, death and resurrection of our Lord as witnessed by the most intimate of his disciples and followers.” Additionally, Townsend’s drama featured “the return of the Ethiopian Wise man, whom Tradition says was one of the first Gentile worshippers at the
Manger-Cradle,” and the advertisement in the *National Baptist Voice* also stated the drama was for use at any time of the year. 51  *The Story of Baltasar, The Black Magus*, was Eva Jessye’s oratorio for a 1932 Christmas broadcast for NBC Radio in New York, wherein Jessye created a narrative and made use of spirituals for African American listeners to envision their race’s participation in sacred history. As Judith Weisenfeld notes, Jessye’s production centers “Baltasar of Ethiop” as a man who followed Hebrew messianic prophecy, thereby celebrating Baltasar for trusting “a faith not [his] own.” Weisenfeld concludes, “African peoples were there from the beginning of Christian history, *The Story of Baltasar* asserts, and, represented in the person of Baltasar, they recognized the significance of the combination of divinity and humanity in the infant whom Christians believe was the Messiah.” 52 Beyond merely fashioning portraits as visual representations of a “Negro” Christ and biblical characters, black Baptist youth through Townsend’s drama and black radio listeners through Jessye’s oratorio were able both to portray and to imagine a cast of biblical figures and their messiah who were of African origin and descent.

A letter to the editor of *The Star of Zion* from AMEZ Rev. Richard Alexander Carroll in 1930 displayed this minister relating Ethiopian and Canaanite ancestry with contemporary African American identity. Carroll noted that the Ethiopian and Canaanite presence in maternal ancestries, coupled with Semitic paternal ancestries, would nevertheless render many of the Bible’s characters black according to America’s system of racial classification: “There are many Biblical characters whose mothers were Ethiopians or Canaanites, etc., and fathers were

Shemitic or many other races, who, if they were in America would be called Negroes, or Ethiopians according to the ‘closed door’ religion manifested in America, which makes you a Negro if you have one drop of Negro blood in your veins.” But like Webb, Carroll the minister listed several biblical names and verses to indicate the Bible’s Negro heritage, while rendering Jesus’s race Negro but also deeming him a racially universal figure:

It may be interesting to our people to know that Simon the Cyrenian was a Negro (Ethiopian), and that his son Rufus assisted the Apostle Paul in his missionary work while his son Alexander was contemporary with Peter at Jerusalem (Acts 4:6) and also assisted in ordaining him. (Acts 13:1, Rom. 16:21). That Jether, David’s brother-in-law was a Negro (I Chr. 2:17, I K. 2:5-32). That the Syro-Phoenician woman was a Negro, a (Canaanite) woman, (Mat. 15:22, Mk. 7:24-26). That Rahab was a Negro woman (Canaanite) and that all races are represented in Jesus Christ and that he is more easily traced through the Negro race than any other because Adam was not white—red, as the word implies, neither white or black, and ‘in his own likeness he begat a son,’ from whom the earth was replenished through a direct line to the flood, when all else were drowned but Noah and his family; out of which came the seed for replenishing the earth in the new day which followed in direct succession to Tama, a Canaanitish (colored) woman, the beginning of his earthly lineage. Gen 3:25-26, 5:3, 6:10, 9:1, 38:6-30, Mat. 1:3, Lk. 3:33.”

Closing his letter with “Yours for racial development,” Carroll’s message to the paper’s readership indicates not only the likely content of his sermons or Bible lessons as pastor of several AMEZ congregations over his career—it confirmed and authorized for other black Protestants an approach to reading biblical history that situated Hebrew and Christian scriptures as records of African and “Negro” history.53

“Come Sunday”: A Race’s Essential Religiosity

Thru all the bloody, burdened years
Boola has clung to the Word of God.
Boola believed.
His faith remained the Kindly Light

To lead him safely through the darkness
Of despair, misery, hunger, pain.
God was good, but in His infinite wisdom
Would allow one blessing at a time.
And he answered honest prayers.
He opened Boola’s mouth
And made those Golden sounds come out.
He touched Boola’s heart
And gave those golden sounds a lilt…
A depth…that no one else could duplicate.
He nudged the whites
And said to them: “LISTEN!”

They listened and were lifted up
Those golden tones were lulling tones.
Their consciences were glad. Glad the slaves
Had found the Bible…Singing to their God…
Reassuring, too, it was. Calming. Healing.
Harsh words abandoned. A happy medium!
The spiritual was soothing to singer
And slavemaster, too!54

The claims of an innate black religiosity that even Ellington represented in his music
emerged not solely from perceptions of enslaved black Christian fidelity in the antebellum South.
In Pan-Africanist scholarship, religious thought in the nineteenth century promoted this concept
of the race’s steadfast piety that stretched from the ancient past to the post-Emancipation present.
In the 1887 work Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race, the West Indian educator, writer, and
prominent Liberian émigré Edward Wilmot Blyden (1832-1912) wrote of “Africa’s Service to
the World” from antiquity to the present.55 Blyden recorded “the fidelity of the African” based

54 “Black, Brown and Beige.”
55 Blyden depicted the African continent as a place of refuge and relief throughout the scriptures: “The great progenitor of the Hebrew race sought refuge in Africa from the ravages of famine. We read in Gen. xii, 10, ‘And there was a famine in the land; and Abram went down into Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was grievous in the land.’ Jacob and his sons were subsequently saved from extinction in the same way. In Africa, the Hebrew people from three score and ten souls multiplied into millions. In Africa, Moses, the greatest lawgiver the world has ever seen, was born and educated. To this land also resorted the ancient philosophers of Greece and Rome, to gaze upon its wonders and gather inspiration from its arts and sciences. Later on, a greater than Moses and than all the prophets and philosophers, when in infancy, was preserved from death in Africa. ‘Arise,’ was the message conveyed by the angel to Joseph,
on missionary experience, declaring, “There are no atheists or agnostics among them.” This orientation toward supernatural belief, according to Blyden, had led ancient Greek writers “to regard the fear and love of God as the peculiar gift of the darker races.” As these ancients regarded Africans “the only fit associates for their gods,” the modern distribution of Africa’s descendants in the West—“in all the countries of their exile”—bore the same enduring truth of their “unswerving faithfulness.”

The self-trained historian and journalist Drusilla Dunjee Houston (1876-1941) wrote of an essential belief in God for African-descended peoples, one stemming from the ancient Ethiopian or Cushite past (named for Ham’s eldest son Cush) and one that contemporary “New Negro” leaders could not unsettle. Writing for the Associated Negro Press in 1930, Houston contended that New Negro leaders were fundamentally mistaken in “attempting to represent and voice ideals, hopes and aspirations” for modern African Americans while having no understanding of “Ethiopian nature.” There were “deep underground currents” which ethnology, paleography, archaeology, geology and anthropology were uncovering that confirmed the ancient African parentage of monotheistic societies while also explaining an essentialist racial impulse toward supernatural belief among African Americans:

‘Arise, and take the young child and his mother and flee into Egypt, and be thou there until I bring thee word; for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him.’ When, in his final hours, the Saviour of mankind struggled up the heights of Calvary, under the weight of the Cross, accused by Asia and condemned by Europe, Africa furnished the man to relieve him of his burden. ‘And as they led him away they laid hold upon one Simon, a Cyrenian, coming out of the country, and on him they laid the Cross that he might bear it after Jesus.’” Edward Wilmot Blyden, Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race (London: W. B. Whittingham & Co., 1888), 135.

Blyden wrote, “In the version of the Chaldean Genesis, as given by George Smith, the following passage occurs: ‘The word of the Lord will never fail in the mouth of the dark races whom He has made.’ Homer and Herodotus have written immortal eulogies of the race. Homer speaks of them as the ‘blameless Ethiopians,’ and tells us that it was the Ethiopians alone among mortals whom the gods selected as a people fit to be lifted to the social level of the Olympian divinities. Every year, the poet says, the whole celestial circle left the summits of Olympus and betook themselves, for their holidays, to Ethiopia, where, in the enjoyment of Ethiopian hospitality, they sojourned twelve days.” Blyden, 133-134.

Blyden, 134.
“The Negro can not be led to discard God because the nations of antiquity co-eval with Egypt received their conception of the Deity from Ethiopians. Before the decadent civilization that recorded history reveals in Egypt, there had flourished a superior knowledge of God on the Upper Nile. This was in the ages when Egypt was but a colony of Ethiopia. This older Cushite empire had spread its first impulses of civilization to Egypt, India, Chaldea, and to the Aegean through black colonists.”

Houston stated that the Cushites were the “favored people” who “had intimate knowledge of God” before the biblical accounts of the Hebrews. Houston dismissed the historical polytheism of Egypt as a devolution from the “earlier purer form” of monotheism, which she asserted was the Ethiopian gift to the ancient world. Communism and atheism, which Houston identified as the “fantastic theories” that some black leaders attempted to offer to the masses, rested as “the poorest of soil in which to plant the seeds, for Negroes are religious by nature.” Black leaders skeptical of this assertion of racially essential piety—what Houston termed the “early race concept of deity”—ignored what white scholars were teaching as “the mainspring of ancient mythology” in white colleges. In concluding her article, Houston reflected on her mixed racial heritage and how it impacted her relationship to the perceived greater, innate religious fidelity of other African Americans:

I look in wonder at the passing throngs of these faithful black people to their churches. You and I may not attend, but they will be there to the last day of their human existence. They “shout” because they have a communion with God from which you and I of colder and mixed nature are shut out. I do not want to change

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58 Houston wrote, “We must not judge the religion of Ethiopia from the decadent forms of later Egypt, for [Egyptian scholar E. A. Wallis Budge] tells us that three thousand years ago Egypt had lost the meaning of her earlier purer form. The original priesthood had withdrawn to Ethiopia. Ancient authorities admit that the influence of Ethiopian religion was beneficial to the ancient world. Her sacerdotal colonies carried hand and hand with their religion the civilized arts to savage nations. That this early religion was pure may be proved by the sculpture of the early Minoan and Etruscan empires in which is no impure detail. The later sculptures of Pompeii, dominated by North European influences, are too unchaste for description. The old Ethiopian religion became corrupt and false just as we find religion in part today and with this corruption came the fall of Babylon, of Egypt and of Rome. Under its purer forms, the Ethiopian peoples built a great dominating world empire that existed for thousands of years.” Drusilla Dunjee Houston, “Does Leadership Understand the Real Nature of the Negro,” *The Afro-American Presbyterian*, July 30, 1930, 1.
them. We are proud of their constancy. If they lost their grasp of religion they would retrograde.\textsuperscript{59}

Houston’s romantic observations and claims in 1930 may or may not have been representative of widespread racial essentialism about religious belief—namely, that African Americans who also had white or European ancestry bore a diluted religious temperament in comparison to their phenotypically darker siblings. If her primary objective was opposition to atheism and communism influencing African Americans’ concerted, progressive political efforts, then her work for this Associated Negro Press piece was to marshal claims to an ancient racial history that connected African American readers both to the African continent and to a biblical—and pre-biblical—past, one indicative of the race’s enduring purchase on divine belief. Therefore, it was the responsibility of learned race leaders, regardless of hue, to safeguard this orientation or face the prospect of their people’s moral and social degeneration.

*The Star of Zion* quoted the white Unitarian theologian Charles Francis Potter on the Egyptian origins of monotheism in 1930, incidentally one year after Potter had founded the First Humanist Society of New York. Potter’s book, *The Story of Religion*, was of value to the AMEZ editors because it affirmed the belief of many African American Christians that, in editor Davenport’s words, “‘Hebrew genius’ was not the first to conceive the monotheistic thought.” Before Moses was ever “startled by the phenomenon of the burning bush,” the Egyptian ruler Akhenhaten offered for a brief period a religion that was, according to Potter, “…a bright spot in the darkness of the superstitions of the Egypt of the second millennium B. C.” The editorial speculated that Moses must have been aware of this monotheistic history, given that he was “trained in all the wisdom of Egypt.”\textsuperscript{60}

\textsuperscript{59} Houston, 3.
\textsuperscript{60} “Monotheism of Egyptian Origin,” *The Star of Zion*, March 1, 1934, 4.
The 1930s also saw the Pan-African historian and educator Willis N. Huggins (1886-1941) produce *An Introduction to African Civilizations, with Main Currents in Ethiopian History*. This 1937 book, which Huggins co-wrote with his student John G. Jackson (1907-1993), seconded the assertions that Webb the minister and Houston the historian made in claiming African precedents, contexts, and persons for shaping what would become the Hebrew people and religion. Huggins appealed to historical studies of events chronicled in the Hebrew Bible despite his lack of clear investment in promoting a Christian identity for African Americans, particularly in light of Italy’s invasion of Ethiopia. Huggins associated the Egyptian Queen Hatshepsut, the “first great queen in history” with the Hebrew exodus narrative. Huggins stated that the exodus “appears to have taken place circa 1440” after the death of Thotmes (Thutmose) III, and he marshalled contemporary Egyptological arguments to frame the characters surrounding the founder of Hebrew religion as essentially comprising an ancient Negro tale: “Recent discoveries tend to show that Hatshepsut was the one who found Moses in the bulrushes and later it was her favor, that brought him to power and finally her death that made it necessary for him to flee from Egypt to Midian where he married Jethro’s daughter,

61 Huggins served as Executive Secretary of the International Council of Friends of Ethiopia, and he protested the Italian invasion of Ethiopia as a sin of “modern Christian nations who, yesterday raped Africa and carried away millions of her children to be enslaved in the Americas” and who were now permitting tacitly or in actuality Italy’s plan “to slaughter the people in the most ancient Christian land in the world.” Huggins also employed romantic racist rhetoric to contrast hypocritical western Christian nations with non-white nations that sowed the seeds of civilization: “That which passes for christianity [sic] in the modern world is rank poison to western civilization. The principles of real Christianity are foreign to the Occidental mind. Indeed they are little known and less still used. Assuming, for sake of presentation, that the non-white races are the feminine element in human-kind, we see their prostrate forms, torn, bleeding, despoiled, all in the name of wealth, power, Christianity. From these non-whites, have come the bases of the arts, sciences, philosophies and religions; things if rightly used, would create a world in which all men could have bread and peace of mind.

The masculine (white) nations have developed the gifts of the non-whites, but have turned the strength of these gifts to abuse, ignoring, in large measure, their spirit. Armed with this strength the Great Powers today are eyeing each other—if at all, they can see eye-to-eye—over the prostrate forms of Arabia, Africa, India and China. They are carrying out bigger, and more Christian stealth, protected by fiat and mandate of the Covenant of the League of Nations.” Willis N. Huggins and John G. Jackson, *An Introduction to African Civilizations, with Main Currents in Ethiopian History* (New York: Avon House Publishers, 1937), 91-92, 206. Jackson republished this book in 1969 with Negro Universities Press.
Zipporah, the Midianite (Ethiopian) woman.” Lastly, Huggins also wrote of Shishak (Shoshenq I), the “Black Lybian King of Egypt” who oversaw “[t]he dissolution of Israel and Judah” that began in 978 B.C.E.

African Antiquity’s Pious Antebellum Descendants

African American academics, religious leaders, press writers, and artists who rooted this religious and racial essentialism in an African and biblical past also encouraged similar sentimental portraits of African Americans that focused on antebellum religious piety.

According to the original script for Ellington’s 1943 performance of his symphonic composition *Black, Brown and Beige*, his “tone parallel to the history of the Negro in America,” the composer began to tell the audience the history of African Americans through the mythical journey of a Boola, an enslaved African who travels through 300 years of history, including the African slave trade, the colonial era, emancipation, the “Black Metropolis” of Harlem, and finishing with World War II.

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62 Huggins and Jackson, 56-57.
63 Huggins continued, “Jeroboam, then in rebellion against Solomon king of Israel, fled to Shishak, his father-in-law, for protection against Solomon, and remained with the great black ruler until Solomon’s death in 937 B.C. In order to off-set Jeroboam’s hold on Egypt, Solomon also married a daughter of Shishak and thus Shishak became the father-in-law of two rival Jewish rulers. The plundering of Palestine and Jerusalem by Shishak, broke up the old rapprochement between the kings of Israel and the kings of Egypt. With Jeroboam on the throne of Israel he re-allied himself with Shishak in order to raid the kingdom of Judah already weakened by the secession of ten of the twelve tribes.” Huggins and Jackson, 59-60.
64 The *Black, Brown and Beige* premiere Carnegie Hall concert in 1943 featured preview pieces in *Down Beat* magazine and the *New York Times Magazine*. Following the premiere, largely negative reviews characterized the highly-anticipated, long-form work as an unfortunate departure from the “authentic” jazz of Ellington’s earlier, shorter dance compositions. Mixed reviews criticized the *Black* movement (which contained the instrumental “Come Sunday”) but appreciated *Brown and Beige*. Some criticism rested on the Ellington orchestra’s performance that night, others on the supposed pretentions of Ellington himself. Attendant with the emergence of professional jazz criticism, debates over Ellington’s performance and composition persisted into the 1970s as he came to occupy a seat in the jazz pantheon and as critics and musicians discerned his stylistic and compositional influences upon subsequent jazz artists. The first article analyzing the musical structure of the entire work, based on various recordings and transcriptions, appeared in the British journal *Jazz & Blues* in 1974. See Mark Tucker’s compilation of *Black, Brown and Beige* criticism in *The Duke Ellington Reader*, ed. Mark Tucker (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 153-204.
Ellington’s poetry in this chapter’s epigraph reveals through the composition’s first section, “Black,” that Boola’s African history before the transatlantic slave trade extended back to the earliest ancient civilizations of North Africa, the Horn of Africa, and the Near East.

Ellington listed other great ancient nations in this poetic introduction to expand the geography of African American race pride beyond North and East Africa:

Before the great white horde pushed out
Across the seas to your peaceful, plodding shores,
The Bantus in South Africa had long since learned
To till the soil…And bartering
Was their medium of exchange that did not
Blacken men’s souls with greed and hate!
Your people of the [African] Great Lakes mined the gold
And silver, traded precious stones and built
Their homes. They fashioned lovely things
Of pottery and metal, developing a craftsmanship
To this day unexcelled! In the kingdom of Songhay
There flourished a system of agriculture, law,
Literature, music, natural sciences, medicine,
And a schooling system, too. As early as the
Eleventh century you were weaving cotton…..
In the Sudan.65

Boola’s experience on a Southern slave plantation in “Black” portrays African American religiosity in the Sunday experiences of black slaves. Ellington’s poetry introduced the audience to spirituals by detailing the peace they sought against the lashes of their forced daily labor:

Came Sunday. Boola was irresistibly drawn
To that pretty white house with the steeple
So tall, shining there in the sun. Everyone
Who entered there was scrubbed and polished
And all dressed up! How happy they seemed!

When the white voices inside rang out
In triumph…the blacks outside would grunt
Subdued approval. When the white voices inside
Were raised in joyous song, the blacks outside
Hummed along, adding their own touches. Weaving

65 “Black, Brown and Beige.”
Gorgeous melodic, harmonic, rhythmic patterns. 
Thus the spiritual was born. Highly emotional Worshipping of God in song.66

An early manuscript version of Ellington’s introduction detailed the composer’s prosaic construction of enslaved black religious life on Southern plantations, with prose providing the imagery of religiously receptive African American slaves “huddled” beneath a tree. The slaves whispered the Word of God to each other, each of them “sipping the reverent purity / Of each trembling word till he was filled / To bursting with the joy it brought!” Ellington emphasized the African American slaves’ embodied inclination toward belief in their conflicted responses to hearing the white worshippers proclaim the Christian gospel, simultaneously restraining their expressive, emotional reverence for God and identifying the moral hypocrisy of their enslavement:

Thrilling, puzzling, strange it was…
They spoke of love of all mankind….
What then was this? Did they not hear:
“A false balance is abomination to the Lord;
But a just weight is his delight.”…
“When pride cometh, then cometh shame;
But with the lowly is wisdom.”
“The integrity of the upright shall guide them:
But the perverseness of transgressors
Shall destroy them.”

In turn they trembled for the transgressors,
Their joy knew no bounds when words of hope
Renewed in them their faith and trust in God.

HUSH! Don’t shout about it! No! No!
Keep it down! Down! Enjoy your sweet suffering

66 Leonard Feather and Maurice Peress, Liner Notes, Louie Bellson and His All-Star Orchestra, Duke Ellington: Black, Brown & Beige, © 1994 by Jazz Heritage Inc., 513633L, Compact disc. Harvey Cohen provides Ellington’s manuscript sketch of this poetic section: “Came Sunday. With all the whites inside / The church, their less fortunate brothers / Emerged from everywhere to congregate / Beneath a tree. Huddled there, they passed / The Word of God around in whispers… / When the whites inside lifted voices / In joyous song… / The blacks outside would hum along, / Adding their own touches…weaving melodic, / Harmonic, rhythmic patterns. / Thus the spiritual was born. / Highly emotional worshipping of God / In SONG.” Cohen, 217.
Of this profound upheaval of love and joy
In aching silence…

As the enslaved blacks “trembled” in “aching silence” over the prospect that their white “transgressors” would one day meet some form of divine justice, the joy that they embodied (and which they had to subdue in the presence of white Christian masters and mistresses) represented for Ellington an essential African American religious response to the material and spiritual freedom they understood as a promise from biblical scriptures. And with his gifted ability to sing the spirituals like no one else, Boola, who personified African American history, represented how the inherent and steadfast religious nature of African American people allowed them to endure the suffering of Jim Crow inequality following Emancipation.

“Come Sunday,” originally an instrumental composition, stands as Ellington’s musical rendering of the history of these “soothing” spirituals in black America. When Ellington recorded “Come Sunday” for a 1958 album version of Black, Brown and Beige, he recruited gospel singer Mahalia Jackson, who sang lyrics that captured the notion of African American reliance on God in the face of daily hardships:

Lord, dear Lord of love, God almighty, God above
Please look down and see my people through.
Lord, dear Lord of love, God almighty, God above
Please look down and see my people through.

I believe the sun and moon will shine up in the sky

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67 “Black, Brown and Beige.”
68 While appreciating the vocalist for “Come Sunday,” the jazz critic Nat Hentoff was dismissive of the song’s message (likely a reflection of his nontheistic personal orientation). In his Black, Brown and Beige review, for which he rated the album “A major jazz work,” Hentoff wrote, “What makes this set most valuable are the simple, fervent vocals of Mahalia Jackson. She first burns the banality from the lyrics of Come Sunday and at the close of the record adds a moving interpretation of The Twenty-third Psalm.” Despite the later popular acclaim for Mahalia Jackson’s vocal rendition of “Come Sunday,” a 1959 review of Ellington’s Black, Brown and Beige recording of the same year was generally dismissive of Jackson’s involvement in the project, characterizing her singing as “inappropriate” and often unintelligible while deeming the text “troubling in that [the words] exemplify the preposterous gulf that always seems to divide jazz music from its ‘lyrics.’” See Nat Hentoff, Black, Brown and Beige review, Hi Fi & Music Review November 1958), 98-99; and Robert D. Crowley, “Black, Brown and Beige After 16 Years,” in Tucker, The Duke Ellington Reader, 181.
When the day is grey, I know it’s clouds passing by
He’ll give peace and comfort to every troubled mind
Come Sunday, oh, come Sunday, that’s the day.

Often we’ll feel wearied, but He knows our every care
Go to Him in secret, He will hear your every prayer.
Lilies of the valley, they neither toil nor spin
And flowers bloom and spring time birds sing.

Often we’ll feel wearied, but He knows our every care
Go to Him in secret, He will hear your every prayer.
Up from dawn ’til sunset, men work hard all day
Come Sunday, oh, come Sunday, that’s the day.⁶⁹

The first stanza of “Come Sunday” illustrates the individual’s appeal to God for the protection of an entire race. The next stanza turns toward a spiritual rendering of the natural world, one in which the symbols of sustenance and guidance (“the sun and moon”) can be depended on to reappear, even when that provision seems obscured (in this case, by heavy overcast). God’s gift of “peace and comfort”—when Sunday comes—exists for enduring the psychological devastation of a people’s existence in America, less to heal the wounds of the physical traumas of slavery and Jim Crow segregation. With the third stanza, God is for these people an intimate confidant, aware of life’s woes and interested in listening to the individual who elects to give voice to suffering. Ellington then references in the Christian Gospels the instructions Jesus gave his disciples that they must not worry about tomorrow’s provisions, that they should take lessons from natural flora and fauna, and that they should instead “strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness…”⁷⁰ The last stanza speaks to the specific daily reality of enslaved labor—an experience soon replicated in the dawn-to-dusk workdays of black sharecroppers post-

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Emancipation—and the final line captures the African American slave’s anticipation of the one day of respite promised by the antebellum South’s Protestant religious culture.

With “Come Sunday,” Ellington captures the universally familiar in the weariness of daily labor. However, he presents this common experience in (and for) a particular racial story: this is the narrative of a compensatory African American Christianity, an expression of the belief that the divine assuages the spirit in response to how the society abuses the body. Here, Ellington’s reverential musical portrait frames African American religious history as a set of well-established cultural practices. To contemplate African Americans’ enduring religiosity is, for Ellington, to think reverently about a history of always-enduring ancestors, and one may appeal to the same religious concepts as they had when one faces the world’s travails. Weariness with the world’s ills finds its salve on Sunday.

Whereas Ellington’s 1943 poetic introduction to the spirituals celebrated the improvisational creativity of his ancestors in the face of hardship and exclusion, his later 1958 lyrics relegate a concept of religious experience to the weekly practice of a racialized memorialization, where the mode of being religious involves an essential practice of reflecting on one’s racial ancestors as they were religious. The construction of these lyrics echoed what Paul A. Anderson identified as Ellington’s embrace of “the [Harlem] Renaissance project of memorializing the black folk inheritance.”

For the listener, Ellington’s music and lyrics stir up romantic, pastoral imaginations of long-suffering African Americans. Ellington’s musical and poetic reflection on African American religiosity suggests that the utility of one’s religious life is in the individual’s capacity to think fondly and reverently on the faith of one’s mothers and

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fathers and to practice their brand of piety in order to endure society, and one may entertain that idea of relief—only, apparently—come Sunday. Understood in this light, the lyrical content to “Come Sunday” suggests that modern African American religious belief and practice are essentially traditional and customary. For Ellington, the individual practices religious devotion by taking his or her woes to the divine for relief once a week—and not much else. There is no room to capture prosaically or lyrically, for instance, more than a century of (in)visible institutional practices and spaces of theological training, professional education, or political activism in African American religious history—the practices inherent to Ellington’s middle-class black Protestant upbringing. They are implicitly nonessential to the history and practice of African American religion—likely so because this jazz musician’s early life and professional career did not require that he spend time in any of these contexts. Ultimately, Ellington’s appraisal of African American piety is that it bears an inherently classical quality.

Sacred West Africa?

With his music, Ellington rendered a “classical” African American Christianity as distinct from a primitive rendering of pre-Christian enslaved African religiosity and the West African drumming and rhythms regarded as the progenitor of modern American music. Importantly, Ellington reflected other Harlem Renaissance figures’ appreciation for West African culture and history by prizing the notion of a primitive sensuousness for his African ancestors. Ellington introduced his 1940 composition “Ko-Ko” at his 1943 Carnegie Hall concert as “a little descriptive scene of the days that inspired jazz…think it was in New Orleans, and a place called
‘Congo Square’ where the slaves used to gather and do native and sensuous dances, religious dances.”

Furthermore, seemingly in response to criticisms of primitivist representations of African-descended peoples and their history, Ellington even qualified his usage of the word “primitive.” In the 1957 musical allegory *A Drum Is A Woman*, he narrated the journey of Madam Zajj, the “African enchantress” who was the personification of rhythm, as she traveled from the West African coast throughout the Americas. On the track “Congo Square,” Ellington narrated the worship scene commonly associated with African religious frenzied and generative of African American musical rhythm:

Congo Square. Here the crowd has congregated. They all have such strange, far-away looks in their eyes. You can almost smell violence and fear, maybe afraid to be there, or maybe afraid not to be there. [Woman screams] Stage is set. We await the rising of a curtain that is not down or even there. Ah, there on the fringe of the clearing, a girl. Her face is pretty and childlike. The rest of her is pretty, too, but not childlike. Her feet are so motionless, you get the illusion that the tree stump in the center of the clearing is inching itself toward her. She’s oblivious of the waves of desire generating in the crowd, thrilling to every gentle touch of the drum. Another drum, and another drum. Many drums in counter-rhythm, and for every drum we hear, there’s a woman to see. Their gyrations accelerate to a frenzy and a sudden stop, and they all go scurrying out of the clearing. [Sax solo] Eh-heh. [Sax solo continues] One by one, every head turns to the entrance of the most primitive woman. This, of course, does not mean simple or elementary. She is an exciting, ornately stimulating seductress with patterns of excitement and the power to hypnotize and enervate the will toward total abandonment. This, if anybody, must be none other than Madam Zajj...

In keeping with Ellington’s musical romanticism, this album track certainly presents an exoticized portrait of Congo Square’s African-descended ritual participants in an arena and

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atmosphere where both physical and spiritual security were uncertain. And Ellington’s narrative portrait of Congo Square’s women participants renders them not only unconscious conduits of desire but also physical instruments for male drummers. Nevertheless, the descriptive attempt to render “primitive” African-derived rhythms as foundational, complex, and bearing efficacious sway over bodily responses was Ellington’s method of divesting them of negative connotations. Ellington signified their consequential historical presence, although they maintain persistent social and cultural complications that accompany this descriptor (not to mention the feminine gendering of rhythm versus the presumed masculinity of the person producing/in possession of the rhythm). Moreover, Zajj was an inversion of the word “jazz,” the “most primitive” genre of Africa’s descendants whose stimulating, seductive, will-enervating music Ellington not only cherished as a sacred gift of his people’s history but also composed in order to move listening and dancing patrons toward similar “total abandonment” of their social composure.

Further complicating the notion of Congo Square’s musical participants as mindlessly primitive is Ellington’s narration of the women’s accelerating gyrations which come “to a frenzy and a sudden stop” before they scatter from the center. This statement suggests that the music of West Africa’s descendants, which produces ecstatic (religious) bodily responses, engenders and interacts with expressive, emotional dances that are thoroughly regulated performances with the deceptive appearance of chaos. While bearing the superficial appearance of mindless frenzy, Congo Square’s collective practitioners are indeed conscious of their ritual’s temporal and spatial boundaries. Ultimately, Ellington’s descriptive work for primitivism serves to make sophisticated a category often deployed to deride African and African American people and cultures.
However, the “primitive” rhythmic Africa for Ellington stood alongside Liberia, the nation that African American Protestants championed as civilized, also on the West African coast. Ellington’s 1947 production, *Liberian Suite*, celebrated the African nation’s centennial following its independence from the American Colonization Society. This West African nation contained the descendants of enslaved Africans in the Americas who founded a black Christian nation—joining Ethiopia as its younger religious sibling—and the Liberian government had commissioned Ellington to compose and perform this suite to commemorate its founding. *Liberian Suite* lacks any of the instrumentation Ellington commonly employed to convey romantic notions of a primitive West Africa, such as the drumming in songs like “Wild Man (aka “Wild Man Moore)” from *First Time! The Count Meets the Duke* in 1961, “La Plus Belle Africaine” from the live album *Soul Call* in 1967, “Afrique” from *The Afro-Eurasian Eclipse* in 1971, or the “shouting” horn solos in “Moonbow” from the album *Afro-Bossa* in 1963.74 Instead, Ellington chose to present a triumphant musical portrait of Liberia as a modern nation, and *Liberian Suite*’s first song, “I Like the Sunrise” with vocals by Al Hibbler, contains lyrics heralding a “new day” that brings “new hope” after a very “weary” night—a promise that Africa’s inhabitants seeking decolonization and Africa’s descendants in the United States pursuing civil rights certainly desired.75 When compared to *A Drum Is A Woman*, Ellington’s race pride had far less complicated representation in the *Liberian Suite*—indicative of the

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74 Although “Dance No. 3” from *The Liberian Suite* features William “Cat” Anderson’s high-pitched trumpet solo, the compositions style is mainly reminiscent of the tango, a South American dance of African and European origins. The song’s lyrics are: “I like the sunrise ’cause it brings a new day, / I like the sunrise, it brings new hope, they say. / I like the sunrise blazing in the new start, / Night time is weary, oh and so am I. / Every evening I wish upon a star / That my brand new bright tomorrow isn't very far. / When that heavy blue curtain of night / Is raised up high, way out of sight, / I like the sunrise, so heavenly to see, / I like the sunrise, I hope it likes poor me.” Duke Ellington and His Orchestra, “The Liberian Suite: I Like The Sunrise,” *Ellington Uptown*, © 2004, 1952 by Legacy Recordings, CK-87066, Compact disc.
Christian nation’s purchase on the religious and racial imaginations of African American Protestants.

Conclusion

Ellington’s jazz, whatever the present moment, reflected always the established corpus of African American folk culture—those elements of African American life already considered worthy of status as folk expressions and rendered in a fixed sense by singers, dancers, anthropologists, historians, and African American Protestants in these professions as well as within the arts as performers and compilers of an African American national culture.\textsuperscript{76} As the fifth chapter demonstrates in detail, Ellington’s personal sexual practices may have put him at odds with the clerical representatives of African American Protestantism, whose race pride through investments in sacred racial narratives and esteem for a “classical” ancient Africa he shared. Additionally, Ellington’s personal theologizing beyond conventional ministerial guidance or regular church attendance reflected his confidence in grasping the teachings of Hebrew and Christian scriptures, a confidence attributable to both his frequent middle-class black Protestant churchgoing in adolescence and the cultural world that black Protestants shaped and fostered in broader black professional and artistic production. Professional artists like Duke Ellington and others owed their production of righteous representations of their race to African American pageant culture, longstanding narratives of Ethiopianism, Pan Africanist and Garveyite political investments, Harlem Renaissance appreciation and romantic construction of a classical black “folk,” and the popular dissemination of academic and theological arguments along with

\textsuperscript{76} Mark Tucker notes that Ellington reflected often on the “Negro history” he learned as a student, a type of learning about race pride modeled on Carter G. Woodson’s historical project. Musicians who kept alive the tradition of the spirituals, such as Eva Jessye, were also essential to signifying African American religion in a “folk” light at the same time they wished to preserve this tradition as a “classical” form.
artistic performances that racialized scriptural narratives and sacralized a non-Christian and non-
Hebrew African ancestry.

Beyond romantic narratives of African American people and their religiosity in musical
compositions, some jazz women and men performed laudable race representations through other
direct and indirect aspects, outcomes, and responsibilities of their profession as musicians. The
following chapter on jazz vocalist Ella Fitzgerald explores the concerted work to render the jazz
profession a viable celebrity profession for race representation, resulting in Fitzgerald’s
emergence as a race representative with considerable “crossover” appeal and the ability to foster
desegregation and to support activist civil rights organizations. Such outcomes were the pursuits
of religious race professionals who once believed it unthinkable for popular musicians in the jazz
world to accomplish.
Chapter Four
“Beyond Category”: The Aesthetic Pressures of Racial Representation

Ella Fitzgerald is a great philanthropist. She gives so generously of her talent, not only to the public, but to the composers whose works she performs. Her artistry always brings to mind the words of the Maestro, Mr. Toscanini, who said concerning concert singers, “Either you’re a good musician or you’re not.” In terms of musicianship, Ella Fitzgerald is “Beyond Category.”

—Duke Ellington

...[A]n arrangement for Ella is only a framework within which to move. She will do all kinds of things within that framework. Often she’ll add a new twist or

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improvisation, even when we’re actually on stage performing. She may lag behind the beat a bit or move ahead of it, but she always knows exactly what she is doing. What would be musically risky for other singers, she pulls off easily. She rarely sings a song exactly the same way she did last. But we’ve played together so long that no matter what she does, we are all right there together.

—Tommy Flanagan (1930-2001)²

A major singer must swing, improvise imaginatively, and phrase instrumentally. But a major jazz singer must also make each song reflect what he has lived and experienced. Musicianship, however skillful, is not enough. And Ella, technically brilliant as she is, is not emotionally open enough in her singing to merit a place in the first rank of jazz singers. After all these years, do we know yet just who Ella Fitzgerald is? And if she has indeed revealed all there is to tell, there is not enough there for the best of jazz.

—Nat Hentoff³

Introduction

Ella Jane Fitzgerald (1917-1996) was very protective of the tragic details of her turbulent adolescence. Fitzgerald was born in Newport News, Virginia to William Fitzgerald, a transfer wagon driver, and Temperance “Tempie” Williams Fitzgerald, a laundress. Tempie and William were not married, and Tempie eventually partnered with Joseph Da Silva, an immigrant from Portugal. The couple moved with Tempie’s child to New York as part of the Great Migration, and Tempie and Da Silva had a daughter, Frances (whose son Ella Fitzgerald later adopted upon her sudden death). When Fitzgerald began grade school, the family lived in Yonkers in a poor, multi-ethnic community of black Americans and Italian, Irish, Greek, and eastern European immigrants. Fitzgerald attended Sunday services and Sunday school at Bethany AME Church, which moved to Yonkers in 1925. Annette Miller, a neighbor of Fitzgerald, recalled to biographer Stuart Nicholson that the children of her block attended each other’s church, broadening Fitzgerald’s religious experience by lessening the degree of her exclusive

involvement in Bethany AME’s activities. In addition to singing, Fitzgerald enjoyed dancing and initially aspired to the latter as her profession.4

Fitzgerald’s junior high school education was interrupted by tragedy and mistreatment. In 1932, Tempie died suddenly from a heart attack, leaving the teenage Fitzgerald and her sister in the care of Da Silva. Following suspicions that Fitzgerald suffered physical abuse at the hands of Da Silva, Virginia Williams (Tempie’s sister) took Fitzgerald to live with her family in Harlem. Da Silva also died from a heart attack shortly after Tempie’s passing, and Frances joined Fitzgerald in the Williams home.

Prior to her mother’s death, Fitzgerald’s school records showed she excelled as a student; however, these dramatic changes in her home life led to Fitzgerald becoming “fractious” with her Aunt Virginia and dropping out of school. For extra income, Fitzgerald became a numbers runner and a lookout for a “sporting house” or brothel. In April 1933, authorities caught Fitzgerald and placed her in a Hudson River reformatory, now known as the notorious New York State Training School for Girls at Hudson. The 15-year-old Fitzgerald’s offense, according to the log book entry for the “General Record of Girls Committed to the New York State Training School for Girls,” was that she was “ungovernable and will not obey the just and lawful commands of her mother – adjudged delinquent.” In the week following Fitzgerald’s death in 1996, New York Times journalist Nina Bernstein reported that a state investigation of the reformatory in 1936 revealed that “black girls, then 88 of 460 residents, were segregated in the two most crowded and dilapidated of the reformatory’s 17 ‘cottages,’ and were routinely beaten by male staff.” The Hudson reformatory’s English teacher, E. M. O’Rourke, depicted Fitzgerald as a “perfectionist” and model student who participated in the school’s choir; however, the fact

of the school’s segregation and all-white choir proved this to be a fabrication (Bernstein did
determine that Fitzgerald and the school’s other black girls performed with a local AMEZ church
choir at the time). Thomas Tunney, who became the reformatory’s last superintendent in 1965
before it closed in 1976, attempted to have Fitzgerald, by then an internationally famous jazz
musician, return to the school as an honored guest. Fitzgerald refused the invitation, and Tunney
recalled his conversation with her: “She hated the place….She had been held in the basement of
one of the cottages once and all but tortured. She was damned if she was going to come back.”

Fitzgerald ran away from the reformatory in the fall of 1934. Unable to return to her Aunt
Virginia’s home because authorities were looking for her, she became a homeless adolescent in
Harlem. Like many Depression-era Harlemites, Fitzgerald earned tips by entertaining on the
street. It was in this environment that Fitzgerald and two of her friends decided to enter the
newly-instituted Wednesday Amateur Night talent competition at Harlem’s Apollo Theater. On
November 21, 1934, Fitzgerald entered the Amateur Night intending to dance; however,
Fitzgerald stated in many later interviews that a popular dancing duo named the Edwards Sisters
intimidated her, and Fitzgerald entered the competition as a singer. Even though Fitzgerald won
first prize that night and was guaranteed a week’s performance at the Theater, the opportunity
did not materialize because of her disheveled appearance due to her homelessness. In December,
Fitzgerald lost a competition at the Lafayette Theatre but won another amateur night competition
at the Harlem Opera House. Although she received the reward of a week’s performance at the
venue, Fitzgerald received no pay, and Nicholson suspects that the Opera House manager

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deducted the cost of wardrobe he provided her because she had no suitable clothing. Fitzgerald’s young age, appearance, and homelessness prevented her from securing paying work. It was not until Charles Linton, a singer for Chick Webb’s orchestra, brought Fitzgerald to the Savoy bandleader’s attention that her fortunes changed significantly.  

This chapter details the jazz vocalist Ella Fitzgerald’s rise to superstardom as a racial crossover artist, and it claims that her early career was critical to securing jazz as a profession for race representation. Fitzgerald was a homeless, “delinquent” adolescent when she emerged as a popular vocalist for Chick Webb’s swing band, and she became a symbol of a respectable African American woman to counter the negative characterizations of the jazz world as corrupting of youth. Her career in the late 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s became an effective vehicle for the desegregation of performance venues and the creation of integrated clubs, due to her popularity with black and white audiences (see figure 4.1). Fitzgerald’s race representation included her status as a wealthy African American woman who provided for her extended family and who made charitable investments in civil rights organizations, particularly the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). This chapter reveals that Fitzgerald showcased the jazz profession in several aspects as a non-religious vehicle for accomplishing the progressive, integrationist pursuits of religious race representatives.  

In various ways, this highly visible race representation entailed constant black and white press coverage and critical assessments of Fitzgerald, requiring of the professional vocalist a carefully crafted public image protected by herself, her publicists, and her managers. Fitzgerald never divulged much of the early hardship she experienced in her youth and chose, instead, to present a simplified or truncated “rags-to-riches” biography as well as a joyful and optimistic

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6 Nicholson, 14-23.
persona to the public. This persona, coupled with the nature of her vocal instrument and crossover appeal, resulted in debates over whether Fitzgerald constituted a legitimate jazz singer as well as whether her perceived lack of emotion in performance disqualified her as an authentic black jazz woman vocalist. Beyond these debates, this chapter also highlights Fitzgerald’s public religious representations through her music—commercially innocuous, comically entertaining, and professionally serious—even as they provide no detailed certainty concerning her personal religious beliefs and practices, given her decision to remain a relatively private public figure.

Fitzgerald’s professional career allows for a focus on racial perceptions of black women in the jazz profession, in addition to the racial and religious representations black women produced. A complete portrait of Ella Fitzgerald is impossible, given that she produced no memoir and rarely granted interviews. The structure of this chapter is an arrangement of five portraits of Ella Fitzgerald, each reflecting aspects of her professional identity that various publics throughout her career engaged, appraised, and displayed proudly. As a prominent black celebrity, these were inherently portraits of race representation. The first two portraits are of Fitzgerald’s coverage in the black press between the 1930s and early 1960s, through the black press writers who helped the maturing artist craft her professional image as a female race representative. The third portrait showcases Fitzgerald’s contribution to civil rights activism. The fourth section highlights the critical portraits of Fitzgerald’s singing and the attendant questions over her vocal authenticity as a jazz artist and black woman. The last portrait showcases public representations of African American religion through some of Fitzgerald’s studio recordings and live performances.
The Black Press Portrait

Black press outlets in New York City presented articles claiming hometown pride in Fitzgerald’s rise to fame, and they offered the public a rags-to-riches tale of Fitzgerald that placed Chick Webb as the savior who immediately recognized her talent, despite contrary recollections of Webb’s initial lack of interest in Fitzgerald. A June 1937 story reprinted in the *Atlanta Daily World* lauded Fitzgerald through various popular and ostensibly intimate titles, including “First Lady of Swing,” “the dusky peacock of rhythm,” “the Dusky Maid of Rhythm,” and “our little Nell” before revealing an enchanting tale of her discovery as an orphaned amateur by the bandleader who immediately identified her potential for fame:

Visiting the Harlem Opera House one afternoon, Chick Webb heard our little Nell, tearing her heart out over what was to be her last stand for theatrical fame. Turning to his personal manager, he said: “She has every quality I am seeking. She has youth, abundant vitality, and above all else—freshness. How I hope she is willing to be taught a few things.” Webb’s wish was granted. When he talked with her, he found her not only willing, but eager to learn the musical ways of this strange little man who had waited many years for such a voice personality as hers. In her, Webb knew that he had found the queen to do right by his kingly syncopation.7

Other scholars of Fitzgerald and Chick Webb’s orchestra have already discussed this fabricated account of his initial encounter with the young singer. However, this narrative—likely circulated by Webb’s manager, Moe Gale, or Decca Records—plays on themes of royalty seeking and identifying the perfect companion which established the bandleader as both a tastemaker for a legitimate musical profession and as a responsible mentor to a younger musician. Webb’s romantic enchantment is not erotic in this tale, and this presentation reflected the reality that his paternal role for Fitzgerald entailed keeping potential male suitors and their marriage proposals

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away from the young vocalist. Instead, Webb’s objective was to protect Fitzgerald and to cultivate her young, vital, and fresh professional talent into something greater.

Webb was from Baltimore, and black press pride in his successful orchestra meant other writers covering the rise of his new vocalist. Lillian Johnson’s piece for the *Baltimore Afro-American* in October 1937, titled “Ella Fitzgerald Hasn’t Let Success Spoil Her,” implicitly assured black audiences that Fitzgerald’s involvement with Webb was thoroughly beneficial, profiling the twenty-year-old vocalist in a manner that distinguished the jazz artist as a respectable woman bearing sensible taste in professionally-minded young men as she also aspired to black middle-class notions of social stability. The interview occurred while Fitzgerald had an appointment at the La Blanche Beauty Parlor (the writer conducted other interviews with Fitzgerald during salon appointments), and Johnson quoted her as preferring “men in conservative, well-fitting clothes” while also seeking “a pretty little home, somewhere in the suburbs of New York State” more than she cared about owning fancy vehicles or fur coats (see figure 4.2). She was a modern artist who was able to read music without the need for extensive practicing, who played, in her words, “a little harmonica and a little piano,” and who “doesn’t have the superstitions that most theatrical folks have, although she respects the opinions of others on broken mirrors, peanuts, etc.” Fitzgerald did not smoke or drink, but she “didn’t think it was harmful if it didn’t go to excess.” The jazz vocalist was also fond of pets and children, and she informed Johnson of her intention to produce a children’s broadcast in New York City “[n]ot so much for the purpose of discovering talent as for the purpose of giving the children something interesting to do and keeping them out of mischief.” Johnson affirmed succinctly Fitzgerald’s

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personal tastes and aspirations, stating, “All of which bears all the earmarks of a trend to
domesticity.” Despite the singer’s admitted penchant for extravagant hats, Johnson wrote, “Ella
does make an effort to keep the Fitzgerald budget tidy, although she admits that if something
comes into view that she likes, the budget suffers—for that time anyway.” Financial
responsibility included Fitzgerald managing her own bank savings account and U.S. Postal
Savings account, from which she made no withdrawals. Johnson worked to convey to the black

Figure 4.2. Photograph of Ella Fitzgerald. From Lillian Johnson’s *Baltimore Afro-American*
profile of Ella Fitzgerald, October 9, 1937, 5. Reprinted with permission.
press readership that Fitzgerald and Webb constituted a socially and financially responsible pairing.⁹

A discussion of Fitzgerald’s “shyness” on stage led to a conversation about the band’s national travels, revealing Fitzgerald’s (and Johnson’s) progressive optimism concerning racial integration:

She’s traveled everywhere these last three years, sometimes by bus, sometimes by train, East, West, North, and South. She has seen a lot of color prejudice, but it never worried her much.

“I sometimes hear that colored people are not allowed to go here or there, but if we’re supposed to go, the manager usually arranges so that we get in with no embarrassment,” she said.

“For instance, a group of white college boys came to the show and invited me to come to the Delta Rho fraternity dance at the Lord Baltimore Hotel Sunday night.

“Someone told me that colored people weren’t allowed to use the front entrance and the elevators, but when I got there, a group of the boys met me, and we went in, and nobody seemed to take any notice of it.”

All through the South, she found that people, white and colored were friendly, and even in Texas, Mississippi, and Alabama, they came backstage to congratulate her and talk to her when the show was over.

Seriously, she thinks the prejudice is not as strong in the younger generation as it was in their elders, and that given time, it will die out.¹⁰

Fitzgerald reiterated her optimism concerning integration by supporting Benny Goodman’s decision to hire two African American jazz musicians, guitarist Charlie Christian (1916-1942) and pianist Fletcher Henderson (1897-1952), for his orchestra. Down Beat magazine reported Fitzgerald’s endorsement of Goodman’s actions in October 1939: “I believe the hiring of colored

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⁹ Lillian Johnson, “Ella Fitzgerald Hasn’t Let Success Spoil Her: Swing Music’s Biggest Star Hasn’t a Boy Friend; Likes Men Short and Hats Dizzy,” Baltimore Afro-American, October 9, 1937, 5. In another October 1937 article, Johnson recorded Fitzgerald’s appreciation of Webb’s paternal guidance: “And Mr. Webb and the boys have always been co-operative and friendly to the highest extent. Mr. Webb has been unusually kind, taking a fatherly interest and giving advice when it has been most needed, even to seeing that I take care of my money.” See Lillian Johnson, “Ella Fitzgerald’s Hardest Job Was to Get Folks to Listen! And Now She’s the Queen of Swing,” Baltimore Afro-American, October 9, 1937, 10.

¹⁰ “Ella Fitzgerald Hasn’t Let Success Spoil Her,” 5.
musicians in a white band is really mutually beneficial. Both races have a lot to offer each other. It would be hard to understand the advisability of racial distinction where artistry in musical advancement is concerned. The interchange of musical ideas between both races surely must be broadening in influence.”

As this chapter will demonstrate, Fitzgerald’s later experiences with racial segregation and discrimination marked this interview content as ominous. Nevertheless, her celebrity activism continued to reflect her optimistic commitment to racial integration as she matured. What Johnson’s profile provided black readers was an “intimate” portrait of the popular black female vocalist, devoid of any trace of social corruption that characterized black and white criticism of jazz and swing culture and nightlife, and on a sure path toward laudable race representation through celebrity, motherhood, and interracial progressivism.

The notion of a constructive, professional relationship between Webb and Fitzgerald proved valuable for the black press as they promoted these jazz musicians’ work as legitimate and morally innocuous, particularly when tragedy befell the swing orchestra. The death of Chick Webb in 1939 led to the black press’s portrait of Fitzgerald as a genuine, appropriate griever. By rendering the lyrics of a popular song as a mourning tune, Fitzgerald’s participation in Webb’s funeral service exemplified a jazz professional’s understanding of proper affection within a religious space. Waters AME Church in Baltimore hosted Webb’s service, where Fitzgerald performed the 1922 song “My Buddy” by Walter Donaldson and Gus Kahn. The New York Amsterdam News reported that Fitzgerald’s attire and demeanor were appropriate for the black

Protestant environment: “Dressed in black, Ella had been at the side of Mrs. Sallye Webb, widow of the orchestra leader from early Tuesday morning until late last night.” The paper noted that Sallye Webb “was in constant distress” and that Fitzgerald set aside her own emotional distress to console others: “Despite her grief, however, Ella Fitzgerald had gone about comforting other members of the Webb family and steeling herself for the ordeal she was to face that afternoon at the church.” The press portrayed Fitzgerald’s moral commitment in aiding Webb’s survivors as they grieved as evidence of Webb’s proper mentorship of the young jazz vocalist, inhabiting the licentious realm of Harlem nightlife but bearing mature commitments to family and community through comfort and memorialization (see figure 4.3).

“Grief wracked every muscle in the supple body of this brownskinned girl” was the paper’s characterization of Fitzgerald as she held the microphone in front of the Waters AME funeral congregants, composed of “brown, white, black, and yellow” faces. Showcasing the interracial appeal of Webb, Fitzgerald, and the band afforded a simultaneous recognition of the integrated funeral ceremony as a social achievement that Baltimore’s black Methodists hosted. This moment revealed a shared commitment between jazz and religious professionals—racial integration and the valuation of African American life and talent by the broader society. But the paper reiterated Fitzgerald’s commitment to honoring her musical mentor in a socially appropriate manner, despite the “[h]eartless cameramen from daily and weekly papers [who] flashed their bulbs in her face” while she sang. The funeral of this jazz musician was a private and public event, with “thousands milling like refugees in Aisquith street in front of the church” able to hear Fitzgerald’s “heart-broken message over the amplifier.” In this moment, Fitzgerald demonstrated the authenticity of her relationship with Webb and of her commitment to her professional craft by singing through her tears to honor him. The paper reported debates over the
appropriateness of having Fitzgerald sing, with a response from an unnamed musician claiming her participation confirmed her professional chops:

Some criticism was heard that she shouldn’t have been permitted to sing such an emotional song. Others contended she had been hurt enough by the death of Webb and shouldn’t have been called upon to appear on the program at all. However, one musician declared:
“That’s what Chick would have wanted. It takes tests like these to see if you’ve got it in you to be a real performer. She’s true blue!”

Webb’s death put the band’s tour through the South on hold, but this narrative portrayed Fitzgerald as emerging from this loss of her friend as a mature vocalist, one whose resolve compelled her authentic performance during his ceremony. Fitzgerald had proved herself viable in the black press and beyond as a reliable young race representative, respectful of religious spaces, and as a jazz vocalist who was a legitimate black musician of the highest caliber.

Fitzgerald as a legitimate jazz professional and race representative also meant making visible actions of her musical service to others. During Fitzgerald’s engagement at the Howard Theatre in Washington, D.C. in September 1941, she reserved one Saturday night to perform at the Twelfth Street YMCA for a United Service Organization (USO) program. She devoted three weeks in March 1947 to providing a free “song clinic” for four younger African American women who wished to become jazz vocalists. While not promising their employment, she guaranteed the women recommendations to various bands. Fitzgerald’s motivation for her clinic experiment was to be charitable to those who could not afford the cost of singing lessons: “Opportunities are so limited for our ambitious girl singers to get any assistance whatever. The situation is even more difficult for these who can’t afford to pay for training. I feel that perhaps we who have made our mark can do a wise and charitable thing to lend them some encouragement.”

Fitzgerald also affirmed and made legitimate the aspirations of other black celebrities to religious vocations. Bill Bailey (1912-1978), the tap dancer who was one of the stars of the 1943

film adaptation of *Cabin in the Sky*, turned away from the entertainment profession in order to become a minister. Bailey was also the brother of Fitzgerald’s friend, singer and actress Pearl Bailey (1918-1990), and he set out to build a Harlem church. In October 1949, following four years of preaching, *The Pittsburgh Courier* announced that Bailey was to have “a mammoth Gospel revival at the Golden Gate Ballroom” on October 23 to raise funds for a “Church of Christ.” Scheduled to perform that day were “Ed Sullivan, Sugar Ray Robinson, Ella Fitzgerald, Madeline Green, Willie Bryant, Josh White and Pigmeat Markham.” For her jazz profession, Fitzgerald symbolized a moral presence by supporting her fellow entertainer’s Christian ministry.

Fitzgerald’s value as a race representative to black press writers was evident in E. B Rea’s “What Price Glory in Filmdom” in April 1942, which defended Fitzgerald against a Hollywood press release that attributed racist stereotypical speech to her. Fitzgerald’s motion picture debut occurred with the 1942 Abbott and Costello comedy, *Ride ’Em Cowboy*, where she played Ruby. As Ruby, Fitzgerald performs her signature song, “A-Tisket, A-Tasket,” up and down the aisle of a bus. The scene maintains visible segregation by having Ruby return to her seat in the bus’s rear, behind all of the white riders, at the close of the song (see figure 4.4). Ruby had various subservient roles in the film, including that of cook and rodeo clown, but Rea remarked that Fitzgerald “portrayed the part creditably.” A press release recounted the

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16 *Ride ’Em Cowboy*, film, directed by Arthur Lubin (1942; Santa Clarita, CA: Universal Studios Home Entertainment, 2008), DVD.
interaction between *Ride 'Em Cowboy* director Arthur Lubin and Fitzgerald, following Ruby’s appearance in a rodeo scene that contained live animals. Rea provided the offensive excerpt:

Ella Fitzgerald…got her camera baptism while surrounded by thirty wild steers used in a rodeo sequence. Everything was all right with Miss Fitzgerald except for the behoofed steaks, of which she wanted no part.

When the scene was finished, Director Lubin congratulated the badly frightened newcomer on her performance.

“Mr. Lubin,” she replied, “but I’se glad I done okay, this job sho am going to change my mode of livin’.”

Rea remarked, “This writer has conversed with Ella Fitzgerald enough to know that those words were expounded by the white man,” criticizing “the language of Hollywood’s publicists” that belittled black entertainers in order to ensure their films’ profitability among white audiences ill-disposed toward any messages or scenes of racial equality in motion pictures. The quote that the press release attributed to Fitzgerald was an insult “to a star revered as ‘America’s queen of
swing vocalizing,’ and embarrassing to all who know that Ella Fitzgerald couldn’t be such a composer, rave-exponent of song, and such a public figure without a better mode of expression—unless the script called for this reversion to illiteracy.”

Since Ruby’s dialogue did not reflect the attributed quote, any association of Fitzgerald with such speech was possibly credible only with audiences unfamiliar with the famous vocalist.

In the early years of performing, Fitzgerald benefited from favorable black press portraits that posed her young career and its racially progressive prospects as a stark counterargument both to criticisms of a youth culture invested in swing entertainment as leisure culture and to criticisms of jazz as a purportedly immoral and racially counterproductive vocation. Optimism and responsibility—interpersonal, social, and professional—appeared inherent to Fitzgerald’s character. Additionally, they were essential to progressive racial projects to showcase black talent and social propriety in the pursuit of desegregation in all social aspects. Following her years with Chick Webb’s band, Fitzgerald emerged as a solo artist. With the assistance and guidance of new professional management, she built a career that solidified her national prominence as a race representative.

**Lifting the Portrait**

As part of Chick Webb’s orchestra, Fitzgerald had Moe Gale as her manager since her career began in the 1930s. Following a series of performance tours with Jazz at the Philharmonic (JATP) in the 1940s and 1950s, which jazz impresario Norman Granz (1918-2001) arranged, Fitzgerald left Gale and Decca Records and selected Granz as her new manager in 1956. Granz proved consequential to shaping the rest of the vocalist’s prominent career.

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According to jazz historian Tad Hershorn, Granz committed to raising the profile of the vocalist he considered “the greatest singer of our time,” seeking to move Fitzgerald into more prominent performing venues beyond the clubs and ballrooms she toured under Gale’s management and, consequently, moving her financially beyond what Granz deemed the “Fifty-second Street money” of her career performing solely in New York City clubs. This objective also involved Fitzgerald’s presence as a musician who desegregated performing venues and fostered the establishment of integrated ones. Most notably, Marilyn Monroe (1926-1962) advocated for Fitzgerald to perform at the Mocambo in Los Angeles in 1955, and 1956 saw the establishment of Pandora’s Box, the Purple Onion, the Crescendo, and the Renaissance as integrated nightclubs in Hollywood. Hershorn covers the established controversy surrounding the nature of Granz’s management of Fitzgerald’s professional and personal life, presenting both Fitzgerald’s professional and personal acquaintances who found Granz too controlling over the singer and Granz’s own rationale for his decisions to remake Fitzgerald as a “pop-jazz” singer and why he vetoed opportunities for her to record with certain established jazz musicians, including her friend Frank Sinatra (1915-1998). What came from their partnership was the symbol of Fitzgerald as a success story for the promise of racial integration in America, and Granz framed

18 Hershorn writes of the initial financial success of Fitzgerald with Granz as her manager: “Fitzgerald had a busy and lucrative fall and winter of 1956 and 1957, according to an itinerary that also shows her fees, quoted here to indicate her rising economic status. The day after she recorded Ella and Louis on August 16, she performed at the San Diego Palladium Ballroom ($1,500 guarantee, plus 50 percent of the gross over $3,500). Fitzgerald had almost a month off before picking up with the Jazz at the Philharmonic tour between September 15 and October 15 at $6,500 per week. On October 16 she began a two-week engagement, her third, at the Mocambo in Los Angeles ($2,500 weekly) before heading off for three weeks at the New Frontier Hotel in Las Vegas, where, as with JATP, she received $6,500 per week. Afterwards she spent one week at the Chi Chi in Palm Springs (November 19-25, $2,500, plus a three-bedroom suite), three weeks at the Fairmont in San Francisco ($2,000 a week, plus suite) three weeks at Zardi’s back in Los Angeles (December 18 to January 7, $4,000 per week), and just over a week at the Versailles in Miami Beach (January 11-19, 1957, $6,500 plus accommodations).” Tad Hershorn, Norman Granz: The Man Who Used Jazz for Justice (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 223-224.
19 Hershorn, 212-214.
his overbearing managerial role positively when recalling that he secured Fitzgerald a Hollywood residence by bypassing de facto segregation standards:

Finally, when she really made big money, I suggested she move to Beverly Hills. The people who wanted to sell the house wanted the money, and they happened, by coincidence, to be Ella fans. They were delighted to be able to sell the house and say, “This is Ella’s house.” I talked to the real estate agent, bought the house in my name and gave it to Ella in her name. That way, we circumvented the racism that existed. Ella was always shielded from economic choices, but she was always made aware of them.20

Fitzgerald as the owner of a mansion added a domestic dimension to her public portrait—a wealthy black jazz woman who lived in her Beverly Hills home with her son, Ray Brown, Jr. (b. 1949). A November 1961 Ebony magazine article by Louie Robinson, titled “First Lady of Jazz,” showcased Fitzgerald’s economic stability as the head of a household and the wealthy provider for an extended family. Robinson’s article highlighted an established African American jazz professional, providing readers an intimate portrait of the singer by dispelling the legends of her living in an orphanage and of having Chick Webb immediately embrace and employ her after her Apollo performance. Staged shots of the various rooms in Fitzgerald’s Beverly Hills estate centered this African American woman’s decorative tastes alongside her professional achievements (in the images of her award room), her elite interracial group of friends (in portraits of Marilyn Monroe, Nat King Cole, Louis Armstrong, and Dinah Shore), and her family and friends (in a den photo with her son, another taken outside while drinking lemonade with her cousin Georgiana Henry and aunt Virginia Williams, and of her playing a game of 21 with Willetta Clark, her traveling companion) (see figure 4.5 and figure 4.6). However, the article’s subtitle, “Ella Fitzgerald has won fame and fortune but sometimes when alone, she cries”

20 Hershorn, 227.
indicated a portrait of an essential tragedy in Fitzgerald’s life, namely, the absence of a husband following two previous marriages. This folded Fitzgerald into tragic narratives that followed prominent black women in the arts. Nevertheless, Fitzgerald’s extended comments in the interview supported the article’s fundamental implication that jazz musicianship was a professional existence, and Fitzgerald regarded the lack of a steady romantic male partner in her life as partially resulting from the more stressful aspects of her profession:
Ella would like to marry again, but the harsh traveling demands of her career make the practicality of marriage a question mark. "I know I’ve got funny ways from having lived by myself for so long," Ella admits in thinking of a third marriage. Ella lives in the big house with her son, Ray Brown Jr., III. The Fitzgerald house was decorated by Helen Robertson of Cassell and Stella Studios.

Figure 4.6. Photograph of Ella Fitzgerald and Ray Brown, Jr. in her Beverly Hills home's recreation room (includes photos of bedroom and dining room). From Louie Robinson's *Ebony* profile of Ella Fitzgerald, November 1961, 132.
marriage. “It would have to be someone who loved his work, so that when we’re home, we’re home, and when we’re working, we’re working, and there are no jealousies. Jealousy was one of my faults before, I admit that. And I’d say jealousy comes from insecurity….

Fitzgerald was more than aware of her stature as a racially representative celebrity and how it complicated her pursuit of romantic interests: “When you’re in the public eye, you don’t want to do things that will make people feel that you’re not right. But then when you’re sitting home by yourself, you ask: ‘Who am I pleasing now?’…for two years I’ve sat right in the house with the TV, and it’s no good.’ Then she adds with a twinkle: ‘So this year I’ve decided to go looking.’

Robinson segued from the discussion of Fitzgerald’s personal life back to her future professional aims, assessing the jazz vocalist as offering something of value to generations beyond an exclusively adult fan base that continued to consume her music:

The ingrown problems of Ella Fitzgerald do not, however, obscure her basic character. She is an intelligent, generous, fun-loving, keenly feminine woman who, without her own particular emotional makeup probably would not be able to sing as brilliantly of life and love as she does. Nor, perhaps, would she be considering the kind of excursion out of the world of jazz and pop singing that she now has in mind. “I would like to do a children’s album,” she explains. “A woman in Florida told me that her little boy, who was suffering from multiple sclerosis, learned to talk from listening to my records. I feel that if I could possibly make sense to children and help that way, I would have really accomplished something. And I’d love to have a television program for children where I could sing songs and discuss their problems.”

By the 1960s, Fitzgerald was a symbol of black professional success. Her public image was that of a jazz vocalist who toured (inter)nationally while maintaining a normal and relatable domestic life. Her career represented a celebration of racial integration, both in her commercial appeal and in her domestic residence, and the prospect of her positive influences upon future generations provided a prominent public case that African Americans’ ongoing battles for

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desegregation and increased economic opportunity were wholesome, critical domestic endeavors for the nation. And because of professional experiences with discrimination, Fitzgerald also made visible her financial commitments to activist organizations working toward desegregation.

**Portrait of Engagement**

According to jazz scholar Ingrid Monson, jazz musicians participated in organizations conducting civil rights activism as a general support of their work and not necessarily to endorse one organization’s ideology or tactics over those of another. Jazz musicians “seemed to respond to particular events in the civil rights movement rather than show exclusive loyalty to particular organizations,” revealing that “practical political action often carried greater weight than ideological purity, especially in times of crisis.”

Participation in charity benefits had been a consistent practice for many jazz professionals, and Fitzgerald had been making these performance appearances since the early years of her career. With Chick Webb’s orchestra, Fitzgerald participated in the Savoy Ballroom’s “Scottsboro Defense Ball” from 10 p.m. Friday, February 21, to 4 a.m. Saturday, February 22, 1936. Partying patrons paid either 75 cents in advance or $1 at the door to support the fund of the National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners, a civil liberties organization working to acquit nine African American teenagers falsely accused and convicted of raping two white women in 1931. Other entertainers that night included jazz vocalist Mildred Bailey (1907-1951) and blues vocalist Bessie Smith (1894-1937). In this instance, urban nighttime recreation and entertainment served to benefit social activism. In 1947, the Norfolk

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Journal and Guide reported Fitzgerald’s suggestion that a national union of all social and charitable agencies exist to “serve as a clearing house and accrediting agency for the endless stream of demands on performers for benefit concerts.” The paper reported that because Fitzgerald knew that she and many other musicians were unlikely to refuse charitable performance requests, “very often it turns out that the so-called ‘benefits’ are nothing more than promotions by unscrupulous operators.” New York’s Theatre Authority held sanctioning power over these events in order to check their validity, and Fitzgerald advocated the establishment of a central body for touring musicians. The Chicago Defender reported that the head of New York’s Theatre Authority endorsed Fitzgerald’s call.\footnote{“Ella Fitzgerald Suggest Union Of Charity Agencies,” Norfolk Journal and Guide, May 17, 1947, A17; and “Theatre Authority To Back Ella Fitzgerald,” Chicago Defender, June 7, 1947, 19.}

The next year, Fitzgerald headlined at Chicago’s State Lakes Theatre for its inauguration of a new policy to feature the “integration of artists in all future bills without regard to race, religion, or nationality.” The Philadelphia Tribune reported, “Miss Fitzgerald cut short an engagement at Bill Berg’s in Hollywood in order to accept the engagement at the State Lakes. She felt that such a progressive experiment deserved the fullest cooperation of every forward thinking artist.”\footnote{“Fitzgerald Heads Chi. Mixed Bill,” Philadelphia Tribune, March 9, 1948, 12.}

Firsthand encounters with segregation that proved prominent entertainers were not immune to racial discrimination influenced Fitzgerald and many others in their financial support for civil rights organizations and activism. Stuart Nicholson’s biography of Fitzgerald recounts her scheduled first-class Pan-Am flight on July 19, 1954 from San Francisco with her cousin Georgiana Henry (also her personal assistant) and Modern Jazz Quartet pianist John Lewis (1920-2001) for performance dates in Australia. During the flight’s stopover in Honolulu, Fitzgerald, Henry, and Lewis were removed from their seats to make room for white patrons,
forcing them to remain in Honolulu for three days and causing the cancellation of the Sydney concerts. Granz took legal action, and the suit “was eventually settled out of court for an undisclosed sum.”\textsuperscript{26}

While touring with JATP in Texas in October 1955, Fitzgerald and Dizzy Gillespie were set to perform in Houston, the home of tenor saxophonist Jean-Baptiste Illinois Jacquet (1922-2004). According to Houston historian Aimee L’Heureux, Jacquet refused to play to segregated audiences in his home town, and he had witnessed the role of Catholic churches in Texas, New Orleans, and Kansas City in hosting both integrated dances and traveling jazz bands.\textsuperscript{27} JATP had previously performed to raise funds for the NAACP, and this group of musicians set out to provide Houston with its first major desegregated concert. Norman Granz recognized that Fitzgerald was a major draw for JATP concerts, and he used her audience demand to ensure Houston Music Hall’s desegregation that evening.\textsuperscript{28} Following the musicians’ first set of the evening, five armed officers from Houston’s vice squad entered Fitzgerald’s dressing room in plain clothes, and they arrested the vocalist, Henry, Gillespie, and Jacquet without a search

\textsuperscript{26} Nicholson writes, “Ella asked for $25,000 damages plus $50,000 punitive damages, while John Lewis and Georgiana Henry asked for $10,000 damages plus $50,000 punitive damages. A spokesman for the airline said it was an ‘honest mistake.’” See Nicholson, 148.

\textsuperscript{27} L’Heureux writes, “Jacquet attended St. Nicholas Catholic Church, a black congregation in the Third Ward, where Father Shepherd hosted similar dances on Sundays. Jacquet remembered the integrated audiences for the Sunday dances, ‘The white people want[ed] to come. They want[ed] to hear the music. There was no one going to stop them…” He reminisced, “And I grew up under that influence…” See Aimee L’Heureux, “Illinois Jacquet: Integrating Houston Jazz Audiences…Lands Ella Fitzgerald and Dizzy Gillespie in Jail,” \textit{Houston History} vol. 8, no. 1 (Fall 2010): 6.

\textsuperscript{28} Granz removed the “white” and “black” signs from the restrooms, and he refused to pre-sell tickets in order to prevent white patrons from purchasing self-segregating seat sections. See L’Heureux, 7; and John Birks Gillespie and Wilmot Alfred Fraser, \textit{To Be…or Not…to Bop} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 407-408. On Fitzgerald’s appeal, Granz reflected: “A lot of people never saw Ella, or they may have seen Ella but not a lot of the musicians. I got to the concert hall early, and somebody came up and wanted to change tickets because they were sitting next to a black [sic]. And I said, ‘No, you can have your money back, but we’re not going to change your seat.’ (The customer took the money.) We did everything we could, and of course I had a strong show. People wanted to see my show. If people wanna see your show, you can lay some conditions down.” See Hershorn, 244.
warrant. Hearing the incident, Granz entered Fitzgerald’s dressing room and saw one police officer entering the bathroom. Granz suspected the officer intended to plant narcotics in the bathroom, and he confronted him, stating, “I’m watching you.” The officer put his gun on Granz’s stomach and responded, “I oughta kill you.” They arrested and charged the group, including Granz, with gambling (Gillespie and Jacquet were playing craps in the dressing room corner at the time of the arrest). The vice squad booked the group, made them pay a fine, asked for their autographs, and released them in time for the second concert set that night. There were reporters and photographers at the police station when the group arrived, indicating the police encounter was a sting operation (see figure 4.7). The humiliation and publicity of the incident led to more integrated concert performances, and Jacquet performed in Houston the next year to such an audience without police interference.

Experiencing racial discrimination led musicians to support activist civil rights organizations. The previous year, on May 28, 1954, Fitzgerald joined Harry Belafonte (b. 1927) and Steve Allen (1921-2000) at the Eastern Parkway Arena for a concert to benefit the Brooklyn NAACP. During the summer of 1960, Fitzgerald appeared at the Stamford, Connecticut home of Jackie Robinson (1919-1972) along with Duke Ellington, Joe Williams (1918-1999), Sarah Vaughan (1924-1990), and Carmen McRae (1920-1994) for an “Afternoon of Jazz” to benefit the student sit-ins of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).

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30 L’Heureux, 7-8. A 1999 *Houston Press* article on Illinois Jacquet recorded Granz’s work to have the charges dropped: “On October 24, 1955, Granz had the charges against himself, Fitzgerald and Henry dismissed, as they were merely onlookers (though watching a dice game under Texas law was a fineable offense). Not fully satisfied, Granz spent more than $2,000 in legal fees to get Jacquet and Gillespie cleared.” “One for All.”
31 Monson, 156-158.
New York Amsterdam News named Fitzgerald, along with soul singer Jackie Wilson (1934-1984) and actor Frederick O’Neal (1905-1992), as three eager financial and moral supporters of the “Back Our Brothers” movement to aid the Birmingham civil rights effort. The nature of their support included contacting President Kennedy, donating money to the movement, and contacting five other prominent or celebrity acquaintances to do the same.\textsuperscript{32}

Fitzgerald appeared partial to supporting the SCLC, and she used one of her scheduled stays at Hollywood’s Crescendo Supper Club in 1963 to perform a one-night benefit for Martin Luther King, Jr.’s organization. Fitzgerald, with trumpeter Roy Eldridge (1911-1989) and the Tommy Flanagan Quartet, agreed to donate the musicians’ normal proceeds for the two performances that night, and the club owner Gene Norman agreed to donate all other proceeds.\textsuperscript{33}

\textsuperscript{33} The \textit{Los Angeles Sentinel} provided the cost to patrons for the evening: “Special arrangements will be made to seat large parties and organizations planning to attend. Prices except for a $5 cover in place of the usual $3.50 will be
A spokesperson for Fitzgerald announced that the engagement netted $5,000 for the SCLC (equivalent to more than $38,600 in 2015 dollars). The Associated Negro Press reported that the Los Angeles City Council cited Fitzgerald for her civil rights efforts, and the press quoted Fitzgerald on the event: “‘Even the musicians donated their pay for the night to this crucial cause,’ Ella said, ‘and everyone went out of their way at added expense to make sure that the Crescendo was packed that night so that I could show my deep support.’”

Fitzgerald composed few songs during her career, but her modest description of a 1968 song she wrote as a tribute to King offers one of her assessments of the slain civil rights religious leader she admired:

Fitzgerald: “I composed a little thing up in Vancouver about Martin Luther King…I’ve had so many requests for it, called “It’s up to me and you, to make this dream come true.” It’s very simple, it’s nothing jazzy or nothing fancy like that….They all seem to like the melody, and it’s simple enough that it’s not a whole lot of mush.

Billy Taylor: Well, it’s the way you felt.

Fitzgerald: Yeah, I didn’t put too many things in it, because he was not the type of man that believed in too much fiery things, so the song I didn’t feel should have been like that. It felt like it should just be soft.

Taylor: Well, he was a very gentle person.

Fitzgerald: Yes, well to me, that’s the impression I had.

maintained. The Early Bird dinner special, consisting of dinner, the show and three drinks will prevail at $5.95 per person. For persons who do not wish to order dinner, a $2.50 minimum will prevail.” See “Rally for Freedom: Ella Fitzgerald Sparks Crescendo Benefit Tues.,” Los Angeles Sentinel, June 13, 1963, A14; and “Ella Fitzgerald’s Hollywood Benefit Aids SCLC,” Jet Magazine, July 4, 1963, 62.


35 “ASCAP presents the Billy Taylor interviews: Ella Fitzgerald,” New York Public Library, sound recording, date unknown.
The official title of Fitzgerald’s song was “It’s Up To Me And You,” released on Capitol Records, with Fitzgerald composing the lyrics and music and with Benny Carter (1907-2003) conducting and providing the orchestral arrangement. Fitzgerald’s sentimental delivery and Carter’s orchestration highlighted the emotion with which she sought to honor King’s memory and to advocate the nonviolent pursuit of social justice and racial integration. Additionally, Fitzgerald’s simple, politically mainstream lyrics revealed her straightforward appeal to general American audiences which no doubt targeted all age groups:

He had a dream, a beautiful dream  
A dream he believed would soon come true  
Let’s make that dream, that dream come true  
It’s up to me and up to you

He fought a cause, never stopped to pause  
A poor man’s dream was his appeal  
Now it’s up to me and up to you  
To make this dream come real

Use common sense, please no violence  
We can live in harmony  
He had a goal, gave his heart and soul  
To set all people free

So let’s not hate and let’s not wait  
That’s my appeal to you  
Yes, it’s up to me and up to you  
To make his dream come true

The Martin Luther King Foundation named Fitzgerald “Honorary Chairman,” and all proceeds from “It’s Up To Me And You” were to benefit the organization established in honor of King’s legacy. At “Ella’s Night,” a ceremony in December of that year, Fitzgerald received

36 Author’s transcription. From Ella Fitzgerald, “It’s Up To Me And You,” © 1968 by Capitol Records, 2212, Vinyl record.
37 See “Ella to Donate $$ From Disk to King,” Billboard, June 15, 1968, 3; and “Ella’s Tribute To The Late Dr. King,” New York Amsterdam News, August 17, 1968, 15.
New York City’s first “Cultural Award” for “exceptional achievement in the performing or creative arts” and was the first entertainer to become an honorary member of the Alpha Kappa Alpha (AKA) sorority. As part of the ceremony, the blind pianist and composer Valerie Capers (b. 1935) played and sang “It’s Up To Me And You” as part of a medley of songs associated with Fitzgerald. AKA sponsored “Ella’s Night” and all receipts went to the sorority’s scholarship fund and to the King Foundation. *Jet Magazine* quoted Fitzgerald upon receiving her honors that evening: “This is like a dream that I didn’t believe would ever happen. It only shows that love is such a beautiful, special thing, love all over the world. This is a memorable night for me; I hope I live up to it.”

Granz and Fitzgerald both recognized her role as race representative for black audiences and to non-black audiences. But this cross racial appeal as a popular entertainer also came with critics questioning Fitzgerald’s placement within the jazz tradition, criticisms that also evinced assumptions about racial essence present in music consumption.

**Critical Portraits**

Concurrent with becoming Fitzgerald’s manager, Granz established Verve Records, the label that chronicled her transition from recording primarily singles for Decca Records to recording the “Great American Songbook” standards that helped to define her international prominence in the 1950s and 1960s. This beginning period with Verve in 1956 and 1957 also saw Fitzgerald recording three landmark albums with Louis Armstrong, including *Ella and Louis* in 1956, *Ella and Louis Again* in 1957, and *Porgy and Bess* in 1957.

There was an unintended consequence for casting Fitzgerald as a pop-jazz singer, and for producing such a massive song book catalog of American musical standards with orchestral

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38 See “AKAs Initiate Ella; She’s Feted On ‘Ella’s Night,’” *Jet Magazine*, December 19, 1968, 56.
backing and less improvisation from Fitzgerald herself in their recorded performances, as opposed to the liberties she took while on tour, where she deployed more melodic improvisation, scatting, and varied tempos while a jazz trio or quartet accompanied her. Critics scrutinized the authenticity of Fitzgerald’s vocal performances and declined to consider her a genuine jazz singer. This chapter epigraph’s third excerpt is from a column by jazz critic Nat Hentoff (b. 1925) in the 1962 debate-editorial “Is Ella A Great Jazz Singer?” which he wrote for *Hi Fi/Stereo Review* with Leonard Feather (1914-1994), who affirmed Fitzgerald’s status as a jazz singer. Jazz critics and audiences expected musical performance, especially performance recorded and reproduced on albums, to reveal authentic existence, not simply musical skill and training. Hentoff regarded Fitzgerald as “an above-average pop vocalist but a minor jazz singer” and an “accomplished stylist” similar to two white jazz musicians, Frank Sinatra and Peggy Lee (1920-2002). Hentoff declared that Fitzgerald appeared unable to convey or to access the emotional depth that he expected to serve as the link between a jazz vocalist’s lived experience and the lyrics of a jazz tune, whether her own or by a professional lyricist.  

Hentoff’s full qualifications for a vocalist to be a “complete, full-strength jazz singer, like Billie Holiday, Louis Armstrong, or Jack Teagarden” were swinging and phrasing, instrumental singing, and timbre. In these three categories, Hentoff claimed Fitzgerald exuded technical virtuosity but lacked a proper conveyance of (or the physical ability to convey) some musical essence. With swinging and phrasing, Fitzgerald “appears unconcerned with the meaning of a song’s lyrics” and “…swings in an emotional and intellectual vacuum…neither remain[ing] faithful to the original nor creat[ing] a new story.” With instrumental singing, the vocal approximation of jazz horns, reeds, and percussion, Fitzgerald was strongest as a scat singer but

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39 Hentoff, 24, 26.
often “sound[ed] like an extraordinarily fluent but dehumanized horn,” exemplifying vocal acrobatics that “[were] brilliantly sustained, but they have less to do with self-expression than with mechanics.” Hentoff again contrasted Fitzgerald with Billie Holiday, claiming “there was not the slightest doubt about the complex nature and uniqueness of a human personality when Billie sang” (see figure 4.8). Concerning timbre, Fitzgerald’s voice was “naturally rather thin and lacking in intensity,” and Hentoff compared Fitzgerald to Mildred Bailey in terms of similar vocal range but deemed Fitzgerald deficient because of Bailey’s ability to personalize her vocal performances through improvisation and to convey a “maturity” that Fitzgerald’s voice lacked:

Like the early blues shouters, like the later, more sophisticated jazz vocalists (Holiday, Lee Wiley, [Anita] O’Day), like Carmen McRae and Ray Charles today, Mildred Bailey brought to her singing a strong sense of life, of adult experience. Had her voice been richer, she might have been even more effective, but there was no question that Mildred Bailey communicated basic emotions, hopes, and frustrations. By contrast, Ella too often sounds like a child, and although much popular music is based on the fantasies of actual or arrested adolescents, the essence of jazz has certainly never been for children.40

Hentoff concluded with an assertion of jazz authenticity’s experiential basis, quoting bassist Milt Hinton (“What makes a great jazz-man is experience”) and Charlie Parker (“If you don’t live it, it won’t come out of your horn”).41 Child-like in voice, purely technical in proficiency, devoid of sufficient vocal emotionality, and seemingly lacking a genuine dramatic jazz man or woman’s lived experiences, Fitzgerald stood at odds with vocal jazz virtuosity and authenticity in Hentoff’s estimation.

40 Hentoff, 24-25.
41 Hentoff, 25. Hentoff added a hypothetical comparison of Fitzgerald performing two landmark jazz songs: “Imagine, if you will, Ella Fitzgerald singing God Bless The Child or Good Morning Heartache, and then compare Billie Holiday’s approach to the same songs. The difference is rather like that between paintings by Norman Rockwell and Ben Shahn.” Hentoff, 25-26. Fitzgerald recorded “Good Morning Heartache” with the Lou Levy quartet for the 1961 studio album Clap Hands, Here Comes Charlie! and performed the song into the 1970s to honor Holiday. Fitzgerald also recorded “God Bless the Child” for the 1982 studio album The Best Is Yet to Come.
Jazz scholar Eden E. Kainer has written of the jazz critics, namely, Nat Hentoff and Gunther Schuller (1925-2015), who “positioned Fitzgerald as a cheerful singer of trivial music, rather than as a soulful and serious vocalist.”

Kainer argues that Fitzgerald’s voice placed her within a category containing other popular black singers, like Billy Eckstine, Chuck Berry, Jimi Hendrix, and Dionne Warwick, who “[did] not perform musical racial personae as expected.”

In the mid-1930s, Fitzgerald was invaluable to Chick Webb’s band as the group’s vehicle for garnering commercial (meaning white mass audience) success. It was in this capacity, claims

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43 Kainer, 181.
Kainer, that (white) jazz critics implicated Fitzgerald “…in the process of ‘whitening’ and thereby compromising the integrity of the band, even as her great talent was recognized.”

Jazz musicologist and dance historian Christopher J. Wells has noted that the emergence of popular music criticism in the 1930s was “…related to the strongly leftist, anti-capitalist project of social transformation with which those constructing the nascent field of critical jazz discourse aligned themselves.” These white male critics represented an elite group of jazz fans with the economic, social, and intellectual means to launch magazines and newspapers in the United States, England, and France. Ultimately valuing a progressive political project of signifying black artists as the creators of culture from positions of oppression, they provided accounts and analysis of live and studio performances for a readership of record-collecting fans of jazz and swing music, in addition to those (like John Hammond, Leonard Feather, and Norman Granz) who became impresarios capable of shaping public perceptions of musicians and of defining a jazz canon through their control of performance and recording opportunities. Consequently, Fitzgerald’s career began in the swing era against a “discursive backdrop in which ideals of artistry were set in opposition to commercialism,” and black jazz musicians who achieved viable livelihoods through profitable, national careers inevitably became subject to scrutiny for their music’s racial authenticity. Jazz criticism privileged the instrumental over the

44 Kainer, 208.
45 Wells relates the social elitism and the anxieties over privilege of these white male jazz critics to their ostensibly progressive projects of crafting discourses about African American (male) artists as authentic agents in the jazz industry: “…[Critics’] obsessive jazz fandom was as much a social catharsis as it was a musical one. Critical engagement with the scenes and sound objects of black popular culture created a platform upon which young intellectuals could construct identities that either masked or validated their advantages, reconciling the disparity between their social class and their values. Toward that end, critics carefully crafted and rigorously policed an anti-capitalist, non-commercial construction of black masculinity, one they built using two of the more pernicious tools their multiply-privileged positions afforded them: racial appropriation and patriarchal entitlement.” See Christopher J. Wells, “‘Go Harlem!’ Chick Webb and His Dancing Audience during the Great Depression,” PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2014, 178, 181-182.
46 Kainer, 209.
vocal, attendant with the industry reality that men dominated the instrumental realm and women were the genre’s few, prominent vocalists.⁴⁷ According to Wells, the criticism that Fitzgerald drew as the overwhelmingly popular black singer fronting Chick Webb’s band revealed her disruption of the traditional vocal role of a “girl singer” for female band performers and demonstrated “the rigorous cultural work that built and policed the masculine aesthetic of ‘pure jazz’ and the homosocial space it maintained.”⁴⁸

For critics, Fitzgerald’s use of “scat” vocals in her singles recordings of the mid-1940s—in particular, her very popular recordings of “Oh, Lady Be Good!” and “Flying Home” in 1945 (released in 1947)—coupled with her tour of the South with fellow bebop pioneer Dizzy Gillespie established her evolution from the role of a “girl singer” fronting a big band to a “serious musician” who was able to jam with male instrumentalists.⁴⁹ “C-Jam Blues,” a 1972 jam session performance with Count Basie and his orchestra as well as instrumentalists named the “JATP All-Stars,” demonstrates a live “battle” from Fitzgerald’s later career decades that recalled her JATP concerts in the 1940s and 1950s as well as her international tour with the Ellington orchestra in the mid-1960s.

But as a solo artist in the late 1940s, and during her continued ascent in the 1950s, Fitzgerald also weathered shifting criticisms that again relegated her professional style and

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⁴⁷ Kainer, 233. On critics’ privileging of the instrumental over the vocal, as it relates to Fitzgerald’s early years with Chick Webb, Wells writes of her threat to the band’s authentic black masculinity: “These critiques rely on gender-coded language as the act of singing, and the role of singer, code feminine in jazz as they do in other genres in part because instruments, insofar as they symbolize tinkering and technical culture, code as masculine objects and instrumental performance as the labor of men. As such, Fitzgerald’s voice was a transgression of masculine space that signified the kinds of commercial concessions critics so deplored. Her growing prominence in the band, previously an exemplar of the real swing music they prized, became an emasculating threat exacerbated by the extremity of her commercial popularity. What critics perceived as Webb’s band’s focus on the light, the frivolous, the sweet, and the popular transgressed their aspirations for what men’s music should sound like and for what male musicians, especially black men, ought to produce.” See Wells, 208.
⁴⁸ Wells, 215.
⁴⁹ Kainer, 222-224.
output to the periphery of jazz, now regarded widely as an artistic form distinct from a popular commercial endeavor. The universal consensus was that Fitzgerald was not capable of being a blues singer, having a light voice instead of the “low, hoarse, or twangy sound” of the genre’s classic singers, and she fell subject to the conflation of “the musical idiom of the blues with a performer’s personal sense of tragedy.” Fitzgerald’s disinclination to sing the blues entailed the dissociation of her particular black female public presence from notions of sexual suggestiveness, an outcome that also meant critics referred to her as “a non-erotic companion, either a mother figure or a little girl.” Her scat recordings provided some critics with a respite from diagnosing her in some fashion with the performance of inauthentic jazz or musical “whiteness”—but even this form of vocal improvisation was not sufficient to locate Fitzgerald firmly in the category of black women’s authentic, emotional musicality.

In the jazz profession, it became a dilemma if an African American woman did not perform vocally the cultural expectations of how black women should sound and which emotions audiences expected black women to convey, based on preconceptions about black jazz

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51 Kainer, 242. An excerpt from New York Times critic Stephen Holden’s 1993 summary of Fitzgerald’s career on her 75th birthday dissociated the singer from both embodying and performing any genuine emotion other than earnest, innocent happiness: “Even when the song was sad, that joy would not evaporate. For instead of self-pity, Fitzgerald transmitted a wistful, sweet-natured compassion for the trouble and heartache she described. Billie Holiday and Frank Sinatra lived out the dramas they sang about. Fitzgerald, viewing them from afar, understood and forgave all. Projecting an unshakable equanimity, and singing in a style that transcended race, ethnicity, class and age, she was a voice of profound reassurance. At the end of everything, there was always hope.

But as much as she exuded a serene spirituality, Fitzgerald did not impart the gospel. If the syllabic density of her scat singing at times suggested someone speaking in tongues, there was never a sense of her surrendering her equilibrium to inner voices.

Nor did she sing the blues. Fitzgerald brought a slow-rolling blueslike pulse into her phrasing and communicated a blues-tinged sadness. But she lacked the tragic awareness and raw sensuality of a genuine blues singer. Although she could act flirtatious, eroticism was never close to the center of her sensibility. Suggesting both the innocent enthusiasm of childhood and the wisdom of old age, her singing bypassed the passions of adolescence and young adulthood. Mother, daughter, friend and teacher, she was more companion than lover.” See Holden, “A Voice That Always Brings a Happy Ending,” New York Times, April 25, 1993, accessed January 13, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/1993/04/25/arts/pop-view-a-voice-that-always-brings-a-happy-ending.html?pagewanted=all>. 


musicians’ biographies. Kainer has argued that “the cheerful, joyful affect of many of her performances distanced her style from common tragic conceptions of the blues idiom, which are so intimately linked to an ideal of musical blackness.”

Illustrative of this affect and its stylistic distancing is Fitzgerald’s performance of “I Can’t Give You Anything But Love” at the Newport Jazz Festival in 1957. Her immediate vocal improvising for each of the three choruses—the first her own rhythmic and melodic style, the second imitating the “Chee-Chee Girl” Rose Murphy (1913-1989), and the third imitating Louis Armstrong—meant that no chorus reproduced the song’s original melody in this vocal jazz performance. Although each chorus represented a different African American vocalist, the comedic effect of the latter two impersonations, evident in audience laughter, was Fitzgerald’s self-representation of a joviality well distanced from conceptions of a more serious, blues-inflected, and tragic musical blackness.

Kainer has also argued that Fitzgerald’s critical and popular listeners developed an “aural understanding of a white middle-class voice” from her specific vocal qualities. Beyond Fitzgerald’s specific vocal qualities, song book recordings of lyrics espousing the cosmopolitan vacationing of Harold Arlen’s “Let’s Take A Walk Around The Block,” the leisure itinerary of Richard Rodgers’s and Lorenz Hart’s “Manhattan,” familial relations as with George and Ira Gershwin’s “My Cousin In Milwaukee,” or the cultural touchstones referenced in Cole Porter’s “You’re The Top” certainly made Fitzgerald’s vocal instrument the soundtrack for white middle-

\[52\] Kainer, 248-249.
\[54\] Elaborating on Fitzgerald’s perceived “white middle-class voice,” Kainer writes: “Fitzgerald had the extraordinary musical ear and vocal control to imitate any accent, sing like other performers such as [Connie] Boswell or Louis Armstrong, or sound like a jazz instrument of her choice. With this kind of phenomenal talent, there were many vocal styles that Fitzgerald could appropriate to shape her sound. The particular sound that she cultivated in conjunction with the natural characteristics of her vocal instrument was often described as light, bell-like, girlish, childlike, clean or clear. Its clarity, or lack of extraneous surface noise; her minimal use of a ‘tear’ or vocal break, a signifier of desire or emotional pain…the absence of nasality or ‘twang;’ her careful enunciation of words and her pronunciation choices from Standard English are some qualities that contributed to an overall smooth, glossy sound.” Kainer, 247-248.
class sensibilities and experiences to which most African Americans in the 1950s and early 1960s would not have related. Norman Granz may have helped Fitzgerald accomplish a racially significant statement by situating her, an African American woman, as the major vocal interpreter of popular American lyricism in the twentieth century through her exhaustive recordings. However, the cultural cost of occupying this prominent professional position was the dissociation of Fitzgerald the jazz vocalist from a black aural and cultural identity—at least from one of the sanctioned public performances for black women that critics within the profession determined.

In reality, Fitzgerald was a major female jazz vocalist who personal hardships signified a tragic, racialized existence. She had experienced the death of her mother in her youth, physical abuse by her stepfather, homelessness, institutionalization, and the torture associated with black women in reformatories. Fitzgerald was unable to conceive her own children, likely from a medical procedure early in her career. Fitzgerald was the victim of physical assault by a “rabid” male audience member during a performance. Additionally, several romantic

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55 Biographer Nicholson writes that at age twenty in 1937, Fitzgerald had a relationship with Vido Musso (1913-1982), an Italian tenor saxophonist in Benny Goodman’s orchestra. By December of that year, Fitzgerald was rumored to be pregnant and was not on tour with the Webb orchestra. Whether from the pressures of the musicians’ professions and management, taboos against interracial unions, or both, it is likely that Fitzgerald sought an abortion. The medical procedure apparently went awry, leaving Fitzgerald unable to conceive. See Nicholson, 45.

56 The Associated Negro Press account in the Atlanta Daily World on July 17, 1957 reported that William Edward Fitzgerald—no relation to Ella Fitzgerald—“leaped upon the stage crying out, ‘you’ve got another man’ and swung heavily on the right side of Miss Fitzgerald’s jaw.” The Baltimore Afro-American located the incident at the Warner Brothers Theatre in Atlantic City, New Jersey, and noted with the Atlanta Daily World account that “[m]usicians and police rushed to Ella’s aid.” The Afro-American also indicated that William Fitzgerald was “a 29-year old former hospital inmate, with a record of narcotics convictions.” The New York Amsterdam News report on July 20, 1957 stated that William Fitzgerald was “a former patient in a mental institution” and continued to beat Ella Fitzgerald after the initial punch, following his initial exclamation with “several obscene phrases.” The NYAD account concluded that Ella Fitzgerald “is not pressing charges against [William] Fitzgerald.” See “Rabid Fan Leaps Stage And Socks Ella Fitzgerald,” Atlanta Daily World, July 17, 1957, 1; “Assailant climbs on N. J. stage,” Baltimore Afro-American, July 20, 1957, 1; and “Send Attacker Of Ella To Mental Hospital,” New York Amsterdam News, July 20, 1957, 3.
relationships Fitzgerald believed to be genuine were based on her financial exploitation, with her first marriage to Benny Kornegay resulting in an annulment.\textsuperscript{57}

Fitzgerald attempted to keep these biographical details from the public, with some becoming known right before and after her death. To arrange her biography around these traumatic life details might have afforded Fitzgerald a different assessment by critics of her fit with conceptions of musical blackness and its emotional modes of conveying racial authenticity. Instead, joy was the principle emotion Fitzgerald elected to convey vocally. Frenetic tempos, which she embraced during the bebop era, breathed improvisational life into jazz standards for her decades of performances. And a “girlish” voice was her natural instrument, often conveying a youthful existence that suggested she had not weathered the racial, emotional, physical, and sexual frustrations expected of a black woman emoting musically in public. Audiences often equated singing with genuine emotion for public consumption, and Fitzgerald’s voice and vocal choices both belied the reality of her experiences and signaled her mission to offer a joyous message to audiences. Up-tempo, ecstatic, scat-filled performances, like “Stompin’ At The Savoy” at the Los Angeles Shrine Auditorium in 1957, represented the exuberant emotional performance and improvisation that Fitzgerald wished to present to live audiences (and the record’s audio indicates that the Shrine audience more than welcomed her musical offering).\textsuperscript{58}

The expectations for black women to bear an authentic musical emotionality reflected a spectrum that encompassed the spirituals and the blues—and gospel music by extension, as it emerged in the mid-twentieth century. In the 1970s, Fitzgerald spoke with Billy Taylor (1921-2010) about consuming audiences’ musical expectations for singers and deployed the term

\textsuperscript{57} Nicholson, 67-70.
“soul” as the measurement of black vocal ability, deeming herself inferior in comparison to singer Aretha Franklin (b. 1942):

_Fitzgerald:_ Aretha’s got her bag going with that soul. Oh boy, she’s got so much soul, she could lend me a little of it, you know. I never had that kind of soul…

_Taylor:_ I can’t let that statement stand unchallenged. To me, soul is many things. And Aretha certainly has what is the current way of putting it. She is directly related to the gospel feeling in music. But to me, I think to hear you sing the blues, for instance, or to hear you do some of the things that are more in the Negro tradition, then I hear the same quality, but in your way. And to me, it’s the same as—well, Charlie Parker and Art Tatum had soul, but I don’t think you would compare what they did—you wouldn’t listen to them in the same way that you would listen to Ramsey Lewis, for instance.

_Fitzgerald:_ Right, thank you for helping me. Well, you got me out of that! [laughs]

_Taylor:_ When you do “Misty,” there is no mistaking that this is Ella Fitzgerald’s kind of soul going into a very beautiful composition by a jazz pianist.59

Fitzgerald’s apprehensions in this conversation with Taylor reveal the importance that African American women’s public emotional religious expressions maintain for assessments of racial authenticity in non-religious vocal genres. Franklin was an exemplar of many twentieth-century African American musicians who emerged from the black gospel tradition and translated its idioms into soul and R&B music. Beyond her joyous gospel, Fitzgerald’s public “soul” was difficult to identity. The following discussion highlights performances and recordings where Fitzgerald presented her versions of religious (and racial) identity for consuming audiences.

**Portraits of African American Religion**

NBC reporter Bobbie Wygant interviewed Fitzgerald around 1980, where the singer reflected in modest language on her belief that divine favor was responsible for her career: “I’m

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59 “ASCAP presents the Billy Taylor interviews: Ella Fitzgerald.”
happy today and I feel that all of the things that have happened have happened for a reason. And I believe in faith, and I believe in the man above, and I guess this is the way it was supposed to be.” Fitzgerald also remarked on the importance of the love she felt from those who appreciated her music, even volunteering herself as an asset to the U.S. government for resolving America’s immediate hostage crisis: “As long as I’ve got the love of people. And that’s the important thing. I think love—if I could go over to Iran and sing, and if they would let me sing, and I thought that would bring the people back, I would go over there and sing ‘How High the Moon,’ anything! [laughter]”

Fitzgerald’s religious commitments beyond a belief in God and in the value of love in human relationships remained unknown to the public, but she produced “religious” representations of African Americans in studio and live performances that arguably provided more a cultural portrait than genuine reflections of her own beliefs and practices. Fitzgerald recorded two singles with the Ray Charles Singers and Sy Oliver and His Orchestra for Decca Records in 1955. With the first single, a cover of a country hit titled “Crying In The Chapel” by Artie Glenn, Fitzgerald performed a religious testimony of fulfillment and commitment that casts the song’s title at odds with its mood and content, were the album’s purchaser to expect a jilted lover’s lament with this single. The Ray Charles Singers act as a choir to introduce Fitzgerald’s explanation of her experience with a house of worship, clarifying that the emotionality that one witnessed was not the singer in distress but her religious delight:


61 Not to be confused with African American singer, pianist, and composer Ray Charles (1930-2004), the Ray Charles Singers group was the creation of white American singer and songwriter Ray Charles, born Charles Raymond Offenberg (1918-2015).
[Choir: Aaaaaaah...]

You saw me crying in the chapel,
The tears I shed were tears of joy.
I know the meaning of contentment now,
I am happy with the Lord.

Just a plain and simple chapel
Where humble people go to pray.
I pray the Lord that I’ll grow stronger
As I live from day to day.

I’ve searched and I’ve searched, but I couldn’t find
No way on earth to gain peace of mind.

Now I’m happy in the chapel,
Where people are of one accord.
We gather in the chapel
Just to sing and praise the Lord.
[Choir: Aaaaaaah...]

An interlude by a Hammond organ associates this arranged jazz tune with African American gospel styles; but rather than conveying a shouted religious ecstasy, the song’s slower tempo and Fitzgerald’s vocal delivery represent a religious commitment marked by modest prayer for daily existence, the pursuit of personal peace, a quiet and reverential awe, and intimate harmony with a religious community. Following the organ interlude, Fitzgerald attests that the listener will also find the same solace and pleasure that she found in this religious community (“Meet your neighbor in the chapel, / Join with him in tears of joy. / You’ll know the meaning of contentment, / You’ll be happy with the Lord.”). Fitzgerald’s vocalization and Glenn’s lyrics evoke a chapel without denominational particularity, although the instrumentation lends the tune some association with African American Protestant worship. And Fitzgerald’s testament to the

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chapel reveals a valuation of a religious institution that requires a different degree of commitment, in terms of one's time and finances, than the degree of commitment a member gives to a church or denomination. A generic affirmation of divine belief and engagement in communal worship make this single palatable to various audiences of religious listeners, exemplifying music artists’ attempts at both racial and genre (religious vs. non-religious music) crossover appeal.

The second single, “When The Hands Of The Clock Pray At Midnight” by Mann Curtis, is a song with lyrics that capture Fitzgerald yearning for romance without a sense of an erotic commitment. Beyond the imagery of clock hands pointing upward as prayer, the lyrics illustrate that the objective of prayer is for Fitzgerald and her lover to be reunited (“When the hands of the clock pray at midnight / And they point to the heavens above / At the end of the day, we silently pray / That the time will hurry by when you’ll come home again to stay.”) The Ray Charles Singers provide a more responsive choir in this song, and it contains a Hammond organ solo following a trumpet solo. Nevertheless, the song appears to have a purpose of further introducing the listener to the various musicians as a supplement to the record’s first side than providing even a general musical message of (African) American religiosity. Milt Gabler (1911-2001), who worked for Decca Records during Fitzgerald’s contract and selected “Crying In The Chapel” for her in an attempt to garner black and white crossover appeal, stated that despite her dislike of the song, the single became Fitzgerald’s biggest hit for Decca in the 1940s.

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64 Nicholson, 127, 141.
Fitzgerald’s decision to release an album of Christian music in 1967 followed the success of Duke Ellington’s Sacred Concert recording and tours. Fitzgerald initially hesitated about recording religious music, telling the Washington Post, “I thought it was wrong. I felt like jazz and religion didn’t mix.” She admired her friend, gospel singer Mahalia Jackson, and she felt insufficient to follow in her gospel lane: “I don’t think anybody sings those songs like Mahalia Jackson. When she gets through, everybody puts them aside.” However, the Post wrote that an unnamed preacher convinced Fitzgerald to record the album: “He told me, ‘This is your talent God gave you.’”

*Brighten The Corner* appeared from Capitol Records in 1967, when Fitzgerald and Granz briefly parted ways before formally reuniting under the Pablo label in 1973. The album was decidedly not a jazz album and featured little vocal improvisation or embellishment from Fitzgerald. Its song selections incorporated nineteenth and early twentieth century white Protestant hymns (including “What A Friend We Have In Jesus”), white evangelical songs (including the title song, “Brighten The Corner Where You Are”), and some nineteenth century African American spirituals (“Just A Closer Walk With Thee” and “I Shall Not Be Moved”). These choices possibly reflected Fitzgerald’s early-twentieth-century AME upbringing, wherein church music consisted mainly of hymns and spirituals and not of the emerging black gospel tradition. With the backing of a white singing unit, the Ralph Carmichael choir, Fitzgerald signaled again her attempt at racial crossover and, for the era, the album represented an imagined racial integration—in this case, an integrated, nondenominational Protestant worship experience.66

By contrast, comical takes on black gospel, especially evident in live concert performances, comprise Fitzgerald’s playful and joyous representations of African American religious music for national and international audiences. Fitzgerald recorded “Hallelujah I Love Him So,” her masculine-pronoun version of the Ray Charles 1956 debut single “Hallelujah I Love Her So,” for her 1962 studio album *Rhythm Is My Business*. Like other Ray Charles recordings, this song was a romantic play on black gospel music—Fitzgerald’s version opens with the organ of the album’s arranger, R&B pianist Bill Doggett (1916-1996)—and it necessitated joyous shouts of “hallelujah!” from Fitzgerald. Fitzgerald’s “Hallelujah” and the other studio orchestra recordings on *Rhythm Is My Business* presented a stylistic departure from her song book interpretations, mainly of white composers and lyricists besides Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn, in part because she chose to work with Doggett, an African American arranger. She worked with other African American composers and arrangers in the 1960s and 1970s, including Quincy Jones (b. 1933) for the 1963 Verve studio album *Ella and Basie!* with Count Basie and his orchestra, Gerald Wilson (1918-2014) for the 1970 Reprise studio album *Things Ain’t What They Used to Be (And You Better Believe It)*, and Benny Carter for the 1979 Pablo studio album *A Classy Pair*, also with the Basie orchestra. While not reaching the popularity of her song book albums for white composers, these albums, like the song book entry for Ellington and Strayhorn, showcased the popular musical compositions of black jazz musicians and composers.

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68 These and other Fitzgerald recordings included multiple compositions by Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn, in addition to Maceo Pinkard’s “Sweet Georgia Brown,” Dizzy Gillespie’s “Night in Tunisia,” Gillespie and Luciano “Chano” Pozo González’s “Manteca,” Thomas Wright “Fats” Waller’s “Ain’t Misbehavin’” and “Honeysuckle Rose,” and Mary Lou Williams’s “What’s Your Story, Morning Glory?”
On tour, Fitzgerald also performed the 1958 song, “I Can’t Stop Loving You” by country musician Don Gibson (1928-2003), a song that Ray Charles also popularized with his 1962 version. Fitzgerald’s live orchestra versions, as heard in May 19, 1968 Cave Supper Club and 1972 Santa Monica Civic performances, lack the strings of Charles’s “sweet” version, and she imitates a chanted sermon in the 1968 performance, enabling a humorous call-and-response interaction with the Tee Carson Trio drummer as well as the Canadian club’s patrons:

Here we are in the Cave,
And I’m preachin’ this mornin’,
I’mma tell you all about my man.
Have you ever loved a man like I love my man?
If you’d have, you’d know how I feel this mornin’. *(Preach, preach, preach!)*
Awwwww, yeah!
All I want is respect in the mornin’,
In the evenin’, all night long.
TREAT me right, baby! Just treat me like a woman, like a lady.
Call me Miss,
Miss Ella to you.
Yeah, yeah, yeaaaaah, I’mma tell ’em.
Tell it to the judge! *(laughter)*
Yeaaaaaah, sock-it-to-me, sock-it-to-me, sock-it-to-me, baby! *(laughter and applause)*
*(Blues vocal run, scat run...)*

This humorous interaction was part of Fitzgerald’s set in 1968, as evident in a Berlin 1968 concert recording that includes a variation of her preacherly interlude with the Carson trio’s verbal and musical responses.

Beyond “I Can’t Stop Loving You,” Fitzgerald’s 1975 Montreux concert version of “’Tain’t Nobody’s Bizness If I Do,” a 1922 blues standard by Porter Grainger and Everett Robbins, contains the vocalist and the Tommy Flanagan Trio performing the tune with a comical

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gospel inflection. When Fitzgerald says at 1:50, “And if I go to church, church on Sunday,” the
tune switches recognizably to a preacherly tale of romance with Tommy Flanagan’s staccato
gospel piano lick, followed by the Montreux Swiss audience’s evidently knowing laughter as a
response. In her verse, “And if I go to church, church on Sunday / Come home and bawl all
night Monday / ’Tain’t nobody’s business / If I do, If I do,” Fitzgerald may have even revealed
her personal habits, given that other renditions by Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday follow the
church line with a verse suggesting the enjoyment of worldly nightlife on Monday. Flanagan
produces gospel riffs throughout the song’s remainder, and Fitzgerald preaches through
humorous stanzas, like “Three times seven! Three times seven makes twenty-one! / Add one
more, add one more and that makes twenty-two! / ’Tain’t nobody’s business / If I do, If I do!”
appearing to use a basic ABCB rhyme scheme to highlight the particular black Protestant
musical and vocal style more than any of its conventional theological or lyrical content.70

While Fitzgerald left no deep public record of her personal religious practices, it is
probable that she relished showcasing her eclectic appreciation of various (African) American
singing styles through the performance of songs like “I Can’t Stop Loving You” and “’Tain’t
Nobody’s Bizness If I Do.” Additionally, Fitzgerald may have simply displayed through humor
the incongruity between the mode of emoting in gospel vocal performance and the modes that
she had honed in jazz and popular song over her career, perhaps playfully signifying the amusing
inauthenticity of her own gospel-inflected performance. Moreover, Fitzgerald’s playful
appropriations demonstrated the cultural currency that African American religious music had
achieved internationally by the mid-twentieth century. Cultural or racial irreverence may be at

70 Ella Fitzgerald with the Tommy Flanagan Trio, “’Tain't Nobody's Bizness If I Do,” Ella Fitzgerald at the Montreux
play with these recordings, while her vocal delivery on *Brighten The Corner* may have represented the reverent style of religious music she preferred in her personal life. If the latter case is true, then Fitzgerald effectively accomplished the objective of the century’s earlier religious race representatives who actively pursued interracial religious fellowships. Whether through her playful or reverent vocal choices, however, Fitzgerald conveyed a joyful disposition as the gospel she offered to listeners and live audiences.

**Conclusion**

Personal decisions and tastes combined with professional management and early press exposure to produce a career of prominent racial crossover, one that symbolized the cultural virtues of racial integration while also compelling desegregation and enabling the construction of new desegregated spaces. Ella Fitzgerald represented personal, domestic, professional, charitable, and activist aspirations for African American women, while the quality of her voice, eclectic song choices, and joyous disposition created critical reservations regarding the sanctioned possibilities for the performance of authentic black womanhood in public. In her commitment to offer a joyous disposition, Fitzgerald constructed a public persona adamantly devoid of the disclosure of personal tragedy and hardships. Coupled with her particular vocal instrument, her singing abilities and self-representation enabled questions about her racial, gendered, and professional authenticity. Despite questions from critics, Fitzgerald was, and chose to represent, a black woman offering joy publicly to consuming audiences.

Such joy, for Fitzgerald, could entail both respectful and irreverent religious representations, while descriptively thick personal “confessions” remained private. The next two chapters represent archival approaches to uncovering complex, thick, and at times private religious beliefs and practices in the personal lives of Duke Ellington and Mary Lou Williams.
Chapter Five
“Is God A Three Letter Word for Love?” Forging an Ecumenical and Interracial World while Wrestling with Divine Language

There have been times when I thought I had a glimpse of God. Sometimes, even when my eyes were closed, I saw. Then when I tried to set my eyes—closed or open—back to the same focus, I had no success, of course. The unprovable fact is that I believe I have had a glimpse of God many times. I believe because believing is believable, and no one can prove it unbelievable.

Some people who have had the same experience I have had are afraid or ashamed to admit it. They are afraid of being called naïve or square. They are afraid of being called unbrainwashed by the people who brainwash them, or by those they would like to be like, or friendly with. Maybe they just want to be in. Maybe it’s a matter of the style, the trend, or whatever one thinks one does to be acceptable in certain circles.

There was a man who was blessed with the vision to see God. But even this man did not and does not have the power or whatever it takes to show God to a believer, much less an unbeliever.

—Duke Ellington, “Seeing God”¹

Introduction

At a November 2, 1969 concert in Copenhagen, Denmark, Duke Ellington introduced the vocalist Toney Watkins (1947-1986) to perform his classic 1943 composition, “Come Sunday.” With this version, Watkins sang a Hebrew translation of Ellington’s English lyrics, just as he had performed the song three years earlier for an Ellington concert at the Reform Jewish congregation Temple Emanuel in Beverly Hills, California. This Hebrew version of “Come Sunday” represented its transformation from Ellington’s original wordless tribute to the African American spiritual tradition in 1943, to a lyrical version with the voice of gospel artist Mahalia Jackson in 1958, and then to Ellington’s offering as a solo vocal or choir song for a series of interfaith occasions in the late 1960s and early 1970s. As Harvey Cohen writes of the original December 1966 Temple Emanuel performance, the concert was significant because it contained “an integration of audiences and forces that rarely united in American society, particularly in this period, with black separatism on the rise and the formerly strong links between blacks and Jews, which proved so important years earlier in the civil rights movement, fraying.”


Earlier, Ellington allowed for this song’s interpretation during the touring of his First Sacred Concert, where he, his orchestra, and a host of soloists traveled to various churches to perform at their requests. Theologically liberal white congregations, like the Fountain Street Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan (an independent, formerly Baptist church that favored affiliation with the Unitarian-Universalist Association in the 1960s), rearranged “Come Sunday” when Ellington performed in their houses of worship.\(^4\) Ellington transformed his Sacred Concert tours into local events by including local choirs in the performance of “Come Sunday” and other compositions, traveling to social and/or theologically liberal—and predominantly white—worship spaces in the United States and Western Europe to showcase the promise of ecumenical and interracial fellowship. These occasions acted to affirm belief in God in the late 1960s, a moment where the public questioning of God’s existence animated the anxieties that many of these mainline and liberal religious communities expressed in denominational conventions, seminary colloquia, theological literature, and interfaith festivals.\(^5\)

Ellington sympathized with any effort to affirm God and to affirm believing in God. While on the road, in preparation for his Sacred Concerts, he used hotel stationery to make notes to himself concerning potential lyrics for his sacred music, in the process transcribing his efforts to verbalize what it meant to express belief in God. A reflection at the Detroit Hilton hotel became a driving assertion of his sacred concerts: “Every Man Prays in His Own Language &

there is No Language GOD Does Not Understand.” With the opposite side of the paper, Ellington explained that music was “My Language,” that it “Got Me into Church,” and that it was “Possibly My Most Eligible Form of Semantics – if I am to Speak to GOD.”

The constantly-touring Ellington made sense of God on the road without a regular church home, theologizing as he read the Christian Bible and engaged mostly liberal religious literature. When he finally attended houses of worship, it was without adhering to their specific doctrinal commitments—it was as a celebrated musician, similar to an honored guest preacher, but bearing a primarily musical and nondenominational message. In these moments, the famous composer could bypass lay status within any denomination and enjoy a relatively exalted status in white religious spaces, and in the black religious spaces where ministers and congregants respected his jazz career, as a professional African American artist who enjoyed more than forty years of career success. In this light, Ellington embraced the authority to speak about God that listening audiences afforded him, and he sought to do so publicly so that Protestants, Jews, and Catholics would accept his musical messages. However, Ellington’s private reflections in hotels reveal that the composer and his God were never exactly Protestant, Jewish, or Catholic.

This chapter contextualizes and analyzes Ellington’s expressed belief in God, his frustrations with language to refer to God, and his appeal to the very act of believing. It reveals Ellington’s undated hotel stationery writings, in conversation with his engagement of religious literature and ministerial friends, as the unexamined arena of his personal religious exploration, reflection, and contention in the process of crafting music to make public expressions of belief. Ellington’s ultimate aspiration was to use his preferred language of music to express wordlessly

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6 “The Detroit Hilton, Detroit, MI,” Duke Ellington Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Series 5: Personal Correspondence and Notes, 1941-1974; Box 6, Folder 1 (Notes, undated).
the proper reverence for God. In that process, however, he wrote lyrics to convey his frustrations with the inadequacy of language to capture what it meant to believe and to speak of God. Ultimately, the concepts of God and of love became synonymous for Ellington, articulated most vocally in his final Sacred Concert. The primary context for examining Ellington’s expressions of belief and conceptions of God is the composition of specific songs for performance in his Three Sacred Concerts, premiering in 1965, 1968, and 1973, that also served to revitalize Ellington’s career as he entered his seventies.

This focus on Ellington presents a complicated social location for an individual engaging in personal religious reflection, ultimately to produce religious music for public consumption. Ellington was a professional elite, as evidenced by the accepted title of “Duke” in the jazz world; however, elitism may not precisely characterize his religious standing. As an African American race representative interested in composing sacred music, Ellington came to enjoy associations with elite white mainline/liberal Protestant ministers, rabbis, Catholic priests, and some African American Christian ministers to a lesser extent. Although never truly a student of a particular religious denomination to appropriately bear the title “layman” in his adulthood, Ellington’s theological explorations marinated in a world saturated with popular religious literature that he studied to compose his Sacred Concerts.

Curiously (and likely coyly), Ellington considered himself “God’s messenger boy,” perhaps embracing an evangelical task with his music and the notion that he lacked any seniority or authority within a specific tradition. “Boy” could have also indicated his fondness for the faith of his youth. But it may have signified his insistence that one should approach faith and

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belief with simplicity, not from a place of high theological training and deftness, but from a posture of openness to contemplating the source, guidance, and destiny of existence. As he wrote in his autobiography, “Like a child, I had always believed that nothing was impossible until it could be proven impossible.”

When Ellington composed music to represent the simple embrace of faith, he produced simplified lyrics—and some critics like Nat Hentoff maligned his words for their apparent naiveté (as mentioned in chapter three). However, the composer’s lyrics often belied the mature artist’s wrestling with matters of ultimate concern that he worked to express religiously through music. Additionally, Ellington expressed no interest in evangelizing “…people who have never heard of God, but those who were more or less raised with the guidance of the Church.”

This statement appeared in a program booklet for his Second Sacred Concert at North Avenue Presbyterian Church in Mount Vernon, New York. A 1966 interview revealed that he did not make an effort to ensure that all musicians performing with him embraced any particular faith: “Some of the other performers weren’t believers, Ellington admitted, but ‘I never got to the point of saying “if you don’t believe, we don’t want to have you perform.” I just let it go along.’”

Was Ellington’s primary intention to relate to those who, like he, had inherited a religious tradition from youth rather than those who had converted to one? There is no salvation narrative or record of a conversion experience, or baptism, with Ellington. If so, then his music lyrics were not likely to represent Christian communities that required conversion experiences from members or elicited their conversion narratives—and Ellington similarly lacked such a conversion narrative. As the chapter epigraph reveals, remembrances of

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10 “Jazz Goes to Fifth Avenue Church,” *Christianity Today*, vol. 10, no. 8 (January 21, 1966), 43.
“seeing God” stuck with Ellington throughout his adult life and compelled his commitment to believing in God, rather than a statement of faith tied to the variety of possible Christian confessions.

The first chapter section provides the context for Ellington’s theological wrestling through portraits of his three Sacred Concerts, the interfaith projects in which his work lived, and the differences between black and white religious receptivity of his musical work. The second section explores Ellington’s descriptions of God, his expressed frustrations with divine language through private writings and by annotating religious literature, and several songs he selected to perform to reflect his characterization of the divine. The third section engages Ellington’s statements of his belief in believing, his private regular engagement with liberal Christian literature, and his affirmations of certain teachings about Jesus in relation to God, given the near-total absence of references to Jesus in his Sacred Concert music. The conclusion reflects on Ellington’s resolution to pose a question equating “love” and “God,” and it suggests that Ellington’s prominent example of religious wrestling complicates notions of shared understandings of belief and practice among individuals within religious traditions.

The Sacred Concerts: Interfaith and Interracial Performances

After New York’s Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church voted to host the east coast premiere of Ellington’s First Sacred Concert in November 1965, at the request of the Protestant Council of the City of New York, the Rev. Bryant M. Kirkland hailed it as “an important religious and cultural event” for the church members and announced that the concert would serve as “outreach into the city of New York as a gesture of our mission to declare the supremacy of God over all human life and as a symbol of our desire to proclaim God’s grace to all the world.” Kirkland assured Fifth Avenue’s members that the traditional Bach and Handel Christmas music
would appear in the services, but he promised that Ellington’s music represented the offering of praise to God “in new tonal forms of subtlety and delicacy.” Kirkland’s letter did not mention Ellington’s compositions reminiscent of modern black gospel music, a genre capable of accommodating delicate, subtle, and complex harmonies but often presented at volumes matching the high degree of emotionality its artists wished to convey. Neither did Kirkland mention Ellington’s vocalists, like Toney Watkins and Queen Esther Marrow (b. 1941), who came from gospel church traditions. Instead, he chose to frame the Sacred Concert for white mainline religious audiences as an opportunity to experience new music that gave voice to modern anxieties wordlessly and that served as a bridge to connect individuals: “Modern music catches the melancholy of contemporary life and the paradox of communication; built-in answers keep some from hearing their brother’s cry of loneliness. When communication takes place in honesty and courage without fear or bitterness the miracle of understanding transpires.”

The Sacred Concerts also served the racially progressive purposes of white mainline congregations following the King assassination and social unrest in America’s urban centers. For the 1968 convention gathering of the Wisconsin-Upper Michigan synod of the Lutheran Church of America (LCA) in Milwaukee, Ellington’s Second Concert inaugurated a series of resolutions to confront “the racial situation and the urban crisis.” The LCA’s communications official, Richard Sutcliffe, told the convention, “You are doing what Duke Ellington told us so beautifully Tuesday night—‘make a joyful noise unto the Lord’,” after they approved nine resolutions, including calling for members to lead in open housing campaigns, approving of interracial marriages, opening their congregations to all races, and disapproving of racial

discrimination in the calling of pastors to particular churches. Additionally, the convention reacted to concerns about police brutality by “commending” fair and honest policemen and expressing “sadness” about police “mistreatment.” The delegates also posed several questions about race relations in local church communities:

How do I treat my neighbor of a different race or color or class?  
Do I refuse to walk beside him? To be seen with him? To eat at the same table with him? To go to the same school or the same church?  
Do I begrudge him fellowship in my congregation?  
Do I put “the most loving interpretation” on what he does? Do I refuse to sleep in the same building with him? To share recreation with him? To employ him or to work with him? Do I refuse help to him who needs me?  
Do I patronize him? Use force against him? Do I refuse him full membership in any organization to which I belong?12

Ellington and his orchestra’s presence in multiple white religious spaces in the United States and Western Europe over eight years symbolized an implicit mission to be an evangelist for racial integration among religious institutions. However, recalling Ellington’s statement that he was “God’s messenger boy” to those who had grown up within a church tradition, it is important to note that he was not the sort of evangelist seeking to change the minds of non-believers concerning the existence of the supernatural. The emergence of the “Death of God” rhetoric in the late 1960s struck Ellington as a national dilemma in which it was more often popular than sincere to state adamantly one’s certain disbelief in God: “Now and then we encounter people who say they do not believe. I hate to say that they are out-and-out liars, but I believe they think it fashionable to speak like that, having been brainwashed by someone beneath them, by someone with a complex who enjoys bringing them to their knees in the worship of the non-existence of God. They snicker in the dark as they tremble with fright.” These remarks

were printed in the North Avenue Presbyterian Church’s booklet for its 1966 Festival of Religion and the Arts, an ecumenical event that also included a performance by Indian sitarist and composer Ravi Shankar, a viewing of the documentary *A Time for Burning* on white Lutherans in Nebraska and resistance to integration, a “Religion and Jazz” discussion with the Catholic “Jazz Priest” Norman O’Connor, and an “African Crafts Exhibit” on the day of Ellington’s concert.\(^\text{13}\) Inasmuch as this event served as an interracial and interfaith practice, it also represented a symbolic unity among religious Americans, rallying against the perceived threat of atheism and agnosticism. The religious declarations of Ellington, a senior artist in an ostensibly secular musical genre, provided additional weight for the cause of generally theistic citizens.

Ellington also did not intend to compel new believers to join particular religious denominations or congregations: “I was brought up in a religious household, and I went to my mother’s church and to my father’s church; it wasn’t the church that mattered, it was the feeling of believing in something, having faith.” Visiting multiple congregations every Sunday of his youth resulted in a lack of commitment to denominational distinctions, and the current social moment simply required people’s reinvigorated sense of faith and commitment to belief in God: “The current ecumenical movement is the thing that will save us by stressing the importance of faith rather than rules or the type of church we happen to attend[.]”\(^\text{14}\) As a member of this ecumenical project, Ellington was encouraged by Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, Unitarian, Lutheran, Episcopalian, Christian Science, and Reform Jewish ministers.\(^\text{15}\) Reciprocally, these


various denominations influenced not only the choir vocals he incorporated into his concerts—
Ellington included the “Litany of Reconciliation” from the Anglican Coventry Cathedral in
England as “Father Forgive” in his Third Sacred Concert—he also relied on various liberal
Protestant denominational literature in his daily religious study.\textsuperscript{16}

Within the broader white American Protestant world, the path was already paved for
Ellington’s sacred music performances in religious spaces. The theologically conservative
Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod’s Concordia Publishing House produced \textit{The Christian
Encounters The World of Pop Music and Jazz} by William Robert Miller, a “reviewer of jazz
records acquainted personally with leading performers” who worked as the religious editor for
the grade school textbook publishing company Holt-Rinehart-Winston. Part of Concordia’s
Christian Encounters series, Miller’s 1965 book set out to “analyz[e] a modern issue with the
tools of Christian truth” based on his perspective as a jazz aficionado, in order to provide a
Christian readership a set of “basic values for determining the creative and spiritual contribution
of modern performers and types of popular music.”\textsuperscript{17} Although published by the conservative
Missouri Synod denomination, \textit{The World of Pop Music and Jazz} also evidenced its author’s
embrace of the theologies of Karl Barth and Paul Tillich when discussing the modern Christian’s

Canon John S. Yaryan as ministers who had encouraged him in particular. See “A Statement from Duke Ellington,”
Ruth Ellington Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History; Series 5: Performances and

\textsuperscript{17} “Sheraton-Ritz, Minneapolis, MN – Coventry Cathedral (All Have Sinned & Come Short of the Glory of God),”
Duke Ellington Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History; Series 5: Personal
Correspondence and Notes, 1941-1974; Box 6, Folder 1 (Notes, undated).

\textsuperscript{18} William Robert Miller, \textit{The Christian Encounters the World of Pop Music and Jazz} (St. Louis, MO: Concordia
responsibility to ensure that cultural production reflects the will of God and must be judged accordingly.\(^\text{18}\)

Jazz, for Miller, had the potential to demonstrate “a creativity and depth that both express and transcend its norms and traditions,” particularly evident in recent compositions by jazz artists addressing civil rights struggles in the American south. Among Ellington’s works in this discussion, he cited the symphonic composition “Nonviolent Integration” and “King Fit the Battle of Alabam,” an adaptation of the spiritual, “Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho,” celebrating the “freedom riders and the struggle of nonviolent church people against police dogs and fire hoses.” Moral integrity was evident in modern jazz because of the social statements many musicians made with their music despite the pressure to “go commercial” and only make popular recordings. These creative jazz artists contradicted the “lurid view of jazz often peddled by slick journalists” who characterized the music as “originating in whorehouses, flourishing in speakeasies, and played today by narcotics addicts in night clubs.”\(^\text{19}\) Ellington served as the exemplary jazz composer in Miller’s writing, given his nearly forty years of composing racially significant extended form music that “parallels the work of classical composers.”\(^\text{20}\)

\(^{18}\) Citing Karl Barth’s *Theology and Church* (1962) and Paul Tillich’s *Theology of Culture* (1959), Miller writes, “‘God’s creation needs no completion,’ writes Karl Barth. ‘It was and is complete. But we can lose that completeness of creation, and we have lost it. It must be restored to us inalienably, by forgiveness and renewal.’ Chief among the processes of renewal is what Barth calls ‘the work of culture’ which embodies the promise of ‘fulfillment, unity, wholeness, within [man’s] sphere as creature, as man…’ ‘The work of culture takes its place among the earthly signs by which the church must make God’s goodness, His friendship for men, visible to itself and to the world.’

Paul Tillich has given this observation a somewhat different emphasis:

*In its prophetic role the church is the guardian who reveals dynamic structures in society and undercuts their demonic power by revealing them, even within the church itself. In so doing, the church listens to prophetic voices outside itself, judging both culture and the church insofar as it is a part of the culture.*

To speak of prophetic voices within and outside the church in relation to culture is to speak of artistic creation, which is a reflection of what Barth means by the work of culture that contributes to the restoration of God’s creation.” See Miller, 9-10.

\(^{19}\) Miller, 73-75.

\(^{20}\) Among Ellington’s major “tone poems,” Miller cites *A Tone Parallel to Harlem, Liberian Suite, Black and Tan Fantasy*, and *Black, Brown, and Beige*. Miller, 77-78.
For his Christian readership, Miller thought it critical to state the importance of jazz as an African American art form integral to American cultural history. Miller signified American cultural creativity as the product of interracial fellowship, wherein African American involvement was principal:

Despite its stylistic cleavages and rivalries, the world of jazz is an interracial community; moreover, it is above all a place where the Negro is not simply tolerated but looked to as the pacesetter—his contribution is incontestable. Throughout history, if we are to believe Arnold Toynbee, nations have achieved greatness through the intermingling of diverse cultures. Negroes in America have been exploited, ignored, taken for granted—even when, as individuals they have excelled in science, painting, or other fields of endeavor. Frequently, Negroes are not excluded, they are merely omitted—from anthologies of American poetry, from films that do not have racial themes, from the boards of all sorts of benevolent agencies. As in popular music, from Stephen Foster to Elvis Presley, the contributions of Negroes to American civilization (Banneker, Carver, Loewy) are quietly absorbed by a culture that continues to think of itself as white. Jazz by its whole history punctures this illusion. Once we begin to take it seriously and penetrate the façade of Paul Whiteman, Benny Goodman, and Dave Brubeck, once we begin to touch the creative sources, we are face-to-face with a challenge to the myth of white supremacy by which we live (whether we believe in it or not).  

Refuting the narrative of jazz history as a lineage of white male innovators (from Whiteman to Brubeck), Miller wrote against the tendency to minimize or erase African American handprints in the fashioning of American culture, and he indicated his support for the pursuit of racial integration. If “[t]he earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof,” argued Miller while quoting Psalm 24:1, then music constituted one of the creative arts which are “part of that fullness which man has fashioned from the bounty of God’s creation.” Such an art, as a divine gift, is “part of God’s covenant with man, and…it is given to man for his rightful and beneficial use as an intelligent and responsible steward.” Miller wrote to convince Christian readers that there were

21 Miller, 79-80.
many contemporary jazz musicians who were making proper use of this divine gift, particularly in an era when religious jazz compositions were becoming popular. The valuable history of African American cultural production, coupled with the expressed need to address social issues with creative art, required white Christians to embrace jazz as an American tradition and to pay attention to religious currents in jazz music. Such literature set the stage for Ellington to feel welcome presenting his religious music in many white American Protestant churches.22

By contrast, the initial embrace of Ellington’s sacred musical offerings by African American Christian congregations was light, if not refused outright. What explained the minimal use of African American worship spaces for this jazz musician’s Sacred Concerts? An Associated Negro Press feature, titled “No Duke Soul in Colored Churches,” presented a perspective of African American Protestant Christianity in which the acceptance of popular music and musicians in religious spaces was not as simple or permissible as with a white Protestant congregation operating under the models of cultural appreciation and racial reconciliation that white Christians like William Miller offered. The piece presented the writer, Jim, having a fictional conversation with a character named Big Mouth (who employs a stereotype of black English), who wondered why Ellington was not performing his Sacred Concerts in African American churches:

“…I have dug in the New York Times, which Sara Lou reads religious, that Mister Edward Kennedy Ellington is making gigs in big, fine, rich white

22 Miller, 100. The World of Pop and Jazz ends with a set of fifteen discussion questions, most likely designed for church Bible study groups debating the place of popular music in individuals’ lives or the place of popular and jazz musical styles in religious music. Miller posed a question that represented his attempt to tie white churches closer to the world of jazz musicians: “12. Is there anything that local churches can do to help provide alternatives to the night club as a place where jazz musicians can earn a living?” The final question referenced Ellington directly, addressing a recording that gospel singer Mahalia Jackson performed for his 1958 Black, Brown and Beige album: “15. Do you think jazz has a legitimate part to play in worship services today? In the future? Is this good or bad? What about hymns for congregational singing, such as those written by Edgar Sumner? Is there a place in your church for Duke Ellington’s setting of the Twenty-third Psalm or similar pieces?” See Miller, 106-107.
churches—blowing them sounds. Now, I am not one to knock any cat’s hustle but, Jim, I do not dig how this have come about.”…

“You do not want to understand, Big,” I retorted impatiently. “You are a prejudiced person. You do not like to see new things happen. Actually, the use of jazz in religious institutions is not new.”

“It is new to me,” Big persisted.

“Even so, if Duke can play his music in a big, rich church, how come Ray Charles cannot give a concert at Second Baptist? Or why can’t Ella Fitzgerald work out at Gethsemane AME? They both has soul, just as Mr. Ellington has and it would be great for collections.”

“I am beginning to see your point,” I said. “You are more prejudiced than I realized. You do not really object to Duke playing jazz in church. Your objection is that he plays it in rich, white churches. Now, I cannot tell you why he has not done so in colored churches.”

“I bet I know why,” Big mused. “I bet no colored churches ever asked him. You are correct, man. Duke has soul and colored churches is really soul churches. But I bet they never asked him.”

While this February 1966 piece would prove inaccurate with Ellington’s performances that year, its comically cynical tone reflected the perception that Ellington was not seeking out less-affluent, black venues for his performances (and thereby neglecting black Christian congregations). This perception met the competing impression that the majority of African American churches were uninterested in popular performers in their houses of worship. For the author, the perceived cultural disconnection between the worlds of the most successful African American entertainers and black Protestant congregations contrasted with the ability of both worlds to produce “soul,” a signifier of an essential set of modern black musical innovations.

According to biographer Harvey Cohen, the strongest outright opposition to Ellington’s sacred performances in religious spaces came from the Washington, D.C. Baptist Ministers Conference (BMC), an association of African American church leaders representing nearly 150 local black churches. The conference passed a near-unanimous resolution “against endorsing the

Ellington performance,” and anonymous reports to the Washington-area press indicated that conference ministers urged their congregations to boycott Ellington’s performances of the First Sacred Concert. Indicating that Ellington’s personal habits were the target of the ministers’ ire, John D. Bussey, pastor of the Bethesda Baptist Church, stated before the concert that Ellington’s life “is opposed to what the church stands for” given his “worldly” professional music and its common setting, the nightclub. One month after the concert, Bussey reiterated his opposition, stating, “We think the man himself is incapable of writing sacred music,” because of the “worldly beat” of Ellington’s jazz music (and contemporary gospel music) and the claim that Ellington’s life “does not commend itself to the sacred.” Despite Bussey and the BMC’s opposition, which kept the December 1966 performance at Constitution Hall from completely selling out, Ellington had the endorsement of many black churchgoers and E. Franklin Jackson, pastor of the John Wesley A. M. E. Zion Church (his father’s congregation).

But the opposition to the Sacred Concerts based on the claim that Ellington’s personal life stood against Christian teaching was likely rooted in the popular image of Ellington as

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24 Cohen references John Bussey’s interview with Kenneth Dole of the Washington Post in January 1967, where he elaborates on his opposition to “worldly beats” that were making their way into church music. Seemingly unfamiliar with Ellington’s sacred music that premiered the previous year, Bussey assumed that the jazz artist’s compositions would bring an emotionally responsive tempo and rhythm to worship music that would affect the worshippers to respond with “over-emotion.” Bussey’s specific criticism of gospel choirs was that when they begin singing, they “[don’t] give the pianist a chance to start playing before they are jumping and jumping and jumping and clapping, clapping, clapping.” Such highly emotional displays, for Bussey, were anachronistic for educated African American Christians in the middle of the twentieth century. Cohen points out that Ellington’s Sacred Concerts lacked the emotionally conducive stylistic, verbal, and musical elements of gospel music; however, Cohen overlooks part of Bussey’s criticism, namely, that since Ellington’s jazz rhythms came from “the beat of the world,” they had the potential to evoke enthusiastic responses from “the uninformed Christian who is just moving by the beat,” instead of the sincerely worshipful Christian, who “is not necessarily moved by the beat so much as by the message of the song.” Bussey’s criticism, echoing the criticisms that religious race professionals of the 1920s and 1930s made in this dissertation’s first chapter, offers a distinction between the emotionalism offered by “worldly” music and gospel that emerged from Holiness-Pentecostal African American Christianity, on the one hand, and the emotionalism produced by responding intellectually to some gospel songs but mainly standard Protestant hymns and African American spirituals, on the other. The latter songs more likely constituted the musical offerings in Bussey’s Baptist congregation. See Cohen, 477-479, and Kenneth Dole, “Pastor Explains Opposition to Jazz Music in Liturgy,” Washington Post, Times Herald, January 7, 1967, E17.
decidedly non-monogamous, in addition to his close association with his younger male co-composer.\(^{25}\) While Ellington’s womanizing was notorious, particularly given the fact that he remained separated from his wife, Edna, without ever divorcing, his close relationship with the openly-gay Billy Strayhorn (1915-1967), his “writing and arranging companion,” likely raised issues for those who found neither man’s sexual practices morally acceptable.\(^{26}\) Given Ellington’s immense grief after Strayhorn’s death from esophageal cancer, his publicist, Joe Morgen, produced a likely-fabricated Strayhorn interview in which the latter composer is “uncharacteristically tough-talking” about his presumed bachelorhood (“his apartment was too sloppy for any gal to stomach”) in order to deflect rumors about a possible sexual component to Ellington and Strayhorn’s relationship. Additionally, at least one recounting of a conversation with Ellington presented the composer affirming Strayhorn’s sexuality as natural, given its historical presence in West African societies.\(^{27}\) Whether protective secrecy or genuine

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\(^{26}\) Ellington and others remarked on the closeness of his musical relationship with Billy Strayhorn, sometimes ascribing a telepathic quality to it. In an hour-long 1970 television special, Ellington recalled that when Strayhorn was in the hospital, Ellington asked him to prepare a theme for “In the Beginning, God” “to keep him busy”: “His theme had six syllables or six tones, and mine had six syllables or tones, naturally, ‘In the Beginning, God,’ and there were only two notes that were different. Now I don’t remember which of his notes were different…[Ellington plays six notes]…His started in the same place and ended in the same place, and only two of the notes in between were different. So it was a very, very close thing.” In the same television special, after playing Strayhorn’s “Lotus Blossom,” Ellington remarked of Strayhorn’s partner, who was also a pianist, “I’m sure Aaron Bridges plays it better than I do,” possibly indicating a closeness to Strayhorn that Bridges had but Ellington could never obtain. The concert is listed as “Duke Ellington: Piano and intermittent talk.” for ORTF Studios in Paris, France on July 2, 1970 in W. E. Timner, *Ellingtonia: The Recorded Music of Duke Ellington and His Sidemen*, fifth edition (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2007), 431.

\(^{27}\) Billy Strayhorn biographer and Duke Ellington Society president David Hajdu addressed the constant speculation surrounding the deeply intimate relationship between Ellington and Strayhorn in a 1999 *Vanity Fair* article, including the perspective of Ellington’s son, Mercer. Hajdu wrote: “As for Duke, Mercer said—with no hint of spin—he had always simply assumed that his father’s bond with Strayhorn, his legendary sexual appetite, and his seemingly boundless sense of adventure likely led to some experimentation with Strayhorn. ‘I don’t know for a fact—I didn’t watch them,’ he said. ‘I just presumed as much. So did the cats [in the band]. One told me he walked in on them one time. I never pressed the issue. It seemed like a given.’

A few of those close to Duke Ellington discussed homosexuality with him directly. According to Sam Shaw, producer of the 1961 film *Paris Blues*, scored by Ellington and Strayhorn, ‘Duke talked to me about Billy and
agnosticism characterized others’ beliefs about the type of intimacy existing between the two men, Ellington certainly expressed no religious opposition to (or condemnation of) his beloved friend’s sexuality. Aside from the perception of Ellington as a womanizer, such acceptance and affirmation of homosexuality may have also put him at odds with the church leaders who opposed the performance of his sacred concerts and doubted his religious sincerity.

Additionally, Bussey expressed to *Jet* magazine that Ellington’s religious sincerity was questionable, because people who became Christians “stop worldly ways.” Ellington had no evangelical conversion narrative—no tale of transformation in a religious revival, no embrace of Jesus Christ on a mourner’s bench, no theophany or religious vision in a dream (of the sort that was common to nineteenth-century southern African American Christianity), no record of a private confession of Jesus as savior. Ellington presented his religious status as someone who was raised within churches and, more importantly, as a “believer.” While in Bangor, Maine, he penned “I Have Sinned—Yes / But Do I Pray as a Sinner[?] No / I Pray—Yes—I Pray—Yes / I Pray as a Believer” as potential song lyrics, although they remained a private reflection. Ellington wrote and spoke as an individual who inherited a religious tradition, rather than as an

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the whole subject of homosexuality. In certain [African] tribes, the priests wore blue robes, which were the symbol of their status. They were considered holy, and they were bisexual—part of the African culture. Duke accepted that as part of nature.’

Some of Ellington’s personal beliefs, feelings, and preferences—including for instance, his habit of wearing blue clothing—are more than just subjects of gossip because they had a significant effect on what he brought to the public...Duke Ellington accepted, nurtured, supported, and empowered a small, shy gay man whom he loved as a soul mate, and he gave voice to that man’s music through his own.” See Hajdu, “A Jazz of Their Own,” *Vanity Fair*, May 1999, 196. It is worth nothing that Mercer Ellington’s reflections in this *Vanity Fair* publication caused controversy for Hajdu. According to James Gavin, “Mercer’s comment appeared in a 1999 Vanity Fair piece that Hajdu wrote about Ellington and Strayhorn. Hajdu caught plenty of heat for it. ‘It was as if I had printed the worst conceivable thing about Duke Ellington,’ he says. Nobody seemed to mind reading that Ellington was ‘a misogynist who treated women like interchangeable body parts,’ Hajdu notes. ‘But the suggestion that he might have had a physical relationship with a man—that was horrific.”’ See Gavin, “Homophobia in Jazz,” *JazzTimes*, December 2001, accessed October 28, 2014, <http://jazztimes.com/articles/20073-homophobia-in-jazz>.

individual who underwent the conventional practices of status transformation within a religious community. The basic assertion of belief, during a perceived age of disbelief, was the ecumenical religious project he wished to promote. If Ellington ever claimed “Christian” as the appropriate label for his professions of faith, however, the (primarily wordless) language he used to convey a journey toward that position of belief, coupled with his sexual practices, would inevitably fail to convince some American Christians that he was one of their sincere brethren.

Despite this instance of opposition, Ellington enjoyed support for his concerts from several African American Christian congregations. He performed his First Sacred Concert at the First A. M. E. Zion Church of Brooklyn, a congregation within his father’s denomination. To address the controversy surrounding mainline black ministers opposing Ellington and his orchestra performing in religious spaces, Ruben L. Speaks (1920-2001), First A. M. E. Zion’s pastor and later a senior bishop of the denomination, wrote an introduction for the program booklet in which he stated that black Christian music initially emerged and continued to serve “as a bridge linking the sacred and the secular,” given the history of professional choirs touring internationally and performing spirituals: “When all other avenues of expression and communications were closed to him [sic], the Negro sent his plea for freedom around the world on the wings of song.” For Speaks, Ellington’s concert remained in this tradition of African American sacred music connecting such ostensibly disparate realms. Speaks also argued that in connecting with the non-religious world, Jesus served as a model for their church as well as Ellington: “Christ never attempted to compartmentalize or segmatize [sic] life; rather, He sought to spiritualize the whole of life. There is no rhythm, tune or melody that is unacceptable to God; if it is an honest attempt to glorify His Name. If it is acceptable to God, it is true worship.” Speaks quoted Psalm 150—as Ellington would in his Second Sacred Concert, when he used this
biblical text for “Praise God and Dance”—to concur with Ellington that he was using God-endowed musical talent for a worshipful purpose. To further sanction Ellington’s compositions, the program contained the performance of sacred music by First A. M. E. Zion’s choir, which performed Bach’s “Now Let Every Tongue” and Alberto Randegger’s “Praise Ye The Lord.” Additionally, the church’s combined choirs performed Ellington’s “Come Sunday,” his famous 1943 tribute to African American spirituals.30

Ellington also performed the First Sacred Concert at a predominantly African American congregation in Boston, Massachusetts that was not part of an historic African American Protestant denomination. Union Methodist Church’s pastor, Gilbert Haven Caldwell (b. 1933), sent Ellington a telegram expressing interest in hosting a concert at his church, hoping to meet Ellington following a concert at Boston Symphony Hall on March 18, 1966.31 In Union’s program booklet for the concert, Caldwell hinted at controversy surrounding the church hosting the concert while ardently favoring it as a sincere religious performance by Ellington:

There may be those who still find it difficult to accept the presence of an outstanding, world-famous Jazz Orchestra presenting a concert in a Church Sanctuary. I understand your reservations because unfortunately we have made a great division between the sacred and the secular. As a Clergyman I accept my share of guilt for perpetuating this division. But tonight we are demonstrating that all that we have has come from God. Tonight Mr. Ellington, The Orchestra and The Choir are making an offering unto God through the presentation of their music.

Caldwell, then a 32-year-old pastor, further stated that he had a “love affair” with jazz music and that it came from “the agony, the striving, the joy my people have known in this land. It

represents one of the many contributions the Negro has made to this great country.”

Generational and denominational differences between Caldwell and other African American ministers in black Protestant churches likely accounted for his appreciation of jazz as a black art form. Caldwell expressed pride in the fact that he was able to “present to all of Boston this Sacred Concert” as representative of African American culture, for “in a very real way jazz had its beginning in the Negro church.”32 As a minority presence within a predominantly white Christian denomination (and city), Caldwell inhabited the role of religious race representative. In this moment, he employed historical pretext as sufficient to justify Ellington’s musical production as religiously sound.

African American religious participation in Ellington’s First Sacred Concert also came from non-ecclesial organizations. A letter from Alma C. Hawkins, president of the International Church Ushers Association of Washington, D.C. Inc., referred to Ellington’s performance at Constitution Hall on December 5, 1966, thereby indicating the service and support of African American ushers at this event despite the disapproval of the concert by several Baptist ministers.33 The Martha Chapter No. 10 of the Order of Eastern Star sponsored a performance of the Second Sacred Concert at the T. A. Willett Auditorium in Portsmouth, Virginia in February

33 “Letter from Alma C. Hawkins to Duke Ellington, December 20, 1966,” Ruth Ellington Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History; Series 5: Performances and Programs, 1963-1989; Box 5, Folder 2 (Duke Ellington’s Concerts of Sacred Music material, 1965-1968). The Interdenominational Church Ushers Association of Washington, D.C. Inc. was also a member of another African American religious organization, the National United Church Ushers Association of America, founded in 1919.
1968. This date featured a “surprise appearance” by famed actor and choreographer Geoffrey Holder for Ellington’s “Praise God and Dance” climax, where Holder performed a “ritualistic dance” on stage while wearing a red toga. The Tougaloo College Choir appeared in the Carnegie Hall performance of Ellington’s Sacred Concert on April 4, 1968 (and the program was interrupted to announce the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., and to pause for prayer). The predominantly-black Tougaloo College in Mississippi was sponsored by the predominantly-white United Church of Christ and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). The Tougaloo Alumni Association of New York was a sponsor of the Carnegie concert, and the college president presented an honorary degree to Ellington. The Alpha Nu chapter of the Omega Psi Phi fraternity sponsored a performance of the Second Sacred Concert at Boyle Stadium in Stamford, Connecticut in June 1968, and the chapter affirmed Ellington’s “growing sense of his vocation and his awareness of an ecumenical tide in religion.”

Following the First Sacred Concert’s acclaim, with Ellington’s “In the Beginning, God” winning a Grammy for Best Original Jazz Composition in 1966, Ellington’s Second Sacred Concert received greater support from African American churches, mainline Protestant and otherwise. The premiere concert at the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine in New York City on January 19, 1968 featured the choir of the Mother A. M. E. Zion Church in Harlem. Eve Lynn, reviewing the performance at Enon Baptist Church in Philadelphia, considered its potential to “open an entirely new world of dramatic music” for churches, an apparent

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confirmation that the concert’s overall sound was quite distinct from either African American spirituals or gospel.\textsuperscript{38} The Second Sacred Concert was performed as a benefit at Saint Augustine Presbyterian Church, an African American congregation in the Bronx (to finance the church’s summer camp) and three days later at Bethany Baptist Church in Newark, New Jersey. Performing the concerts to raise funds for black congregations signaled the Ellington Orchestra’s financial security and perhaps also the socioeconomic distances between black and white mainline Protestantisms.\textsuperscript{39} Additionally, in November 1968, the Second Sacred Concert appeared “under the auspices of Christ Unity [now ‘Universal’] Temple at the Auditorium Theatre” in Chicago, and the “Friends of Unity” choir performed the spiritual “Ain’a That Good News” in the concert.\textsuperscript{40} Johnnie Colemon (1920-2014), the “First Lady of the New Thought Christian Community,” founded this African American New Thought church in 1956.

On most occasions, the Sacred Concerts featured the participation of local church choirs, whether in black or white congregations. Thomas J. Whaley, a composer and arranger who was Ellington’s chief copyist, was responsible for rehearsing the choirs of the congregations hosting Ellington’s performances in the United States and Western Europe. When performing the Second Sacred Concert in Barcelona, Spain, for instance, the accompanying choir was Roman Catholic. In his memoir, Ellington reflected on the interracial and interfaith significance of the concert occasion when performing with this Catholic choir in the Roman Theatre of Orange, France: “…[W]hen I heard them singing in the ancient Roman amphitheatre in Orange with Alice Babs from Stockholm, Toney Watkins from Philadelphia, and our band of musicians from

\textsuperscript{40} “Ellington Approaches Sacred Ideals,” \textit{Chicago Daily Defender}, November 7, 1968.
all over the U.S.A., before a perceptive and very appreciative French audience—then I felt the ecumenical spirit was really working.”

And this “ecumenical spirit” in a welcoming, Cold War-era Western Europe had been made possible due to the State Department having cemented a program of cultural diplomacy by sending African American musicians like Ellington and his orchestra abroad, ideally as evidence of the social and cultural promise of capitalism and representative democracy.

The sacred concert occasion also called for the momentary modification of worship space, or at least the unsettling of its normal appearance and intended purpose to accommodate an unusual religious event. The concerts required the running of microphone cables along the sanctuary floors in order to capture the voices of the musicians and vocalists as well as the precise sounds of the drum set. As a broadcast religious event at the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, Ellington’s concert brought television cameras, camera operators, and even more cable equipment into religious space. The drum set, seating (and portable stage risers) for the trumpets, trombones, saxophones, and a tap dance mat all required space. The performers, dancers and instrumentalists were certain to generate plenty of sweat—and Ellington’s horn and reed players needed to empty spit valves during the performances (see figure 5.2). On the cross-sectional schematic of the sanctuary for the concert performance and setup, the architect recorded the following instructions: “NOTE – CHURCH ENVIRONMENT TO BE COMPLETELY ADHERED TO.” Whether these instructions were for the audio-visual crew, or Ellington and his orchestra, they indicate a recognition that to stage a televised concert

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41 Music Is My Mistress, 281-282.
performance in this worship space was potentially to trouble its sanctity. In the interest of evangelizing with an ecumenical message, Fifth Avenue Presbyterian needed to welcome into its sanctuary an audience extending beyond its regular parishioners to include the press and Ellington fans who may not have had a primarily religious interest in his performance. The Ellington concerts occasioned interfaith and interracial moments in primarily liberal religious spaces; however, attendant with these progressive fellowships was a suspicion about the capacity of “outsiders” to behave appropriately.

Some aspects of Ellington’s wordless reflection on God would never completely translate for audiences, given the acoustic hostility of the religious spaces—cathedrals—to the sounds his instrumental musicians had honed over the years. A *Down Beat* review of the First Sacred
Concert’s premiere in San Francisco’s Episcopalian Grace Cathedral lamented the building’s inhospitable architecture for the jazz musicians’ performance:

…Ellington may have been unaware that much of his musical statement had been lost high in the arched ceiling of the large church. Most of the low tones Ellington’s men produced rumbled and blurred into an impenetrable mass—and to appreciate fully the beauty of Ellington’s music, the lines must be heard clearly. (The band was in an area located somewhat behind the altar—actually a heavy table—and this placement may have added to the cathedral’s built-in acoustical problems.)

For the reviewer, Grace Cathedral’s “devilish acoustics” combined with a poor sound system, particularly noticeable when vocalist Queen Esther Marrow sang Ellington’s “Tell Me It’s the Truth” and “fell victim to the lo-fi public-address system (it sounded like something the cathedral people had borrowed from a store-front church)…” Vocalist Jimmy McPhail (1928-1998) was also “dealt a blow by the sound system and acoustics, making it impossible to understand much of what he was singing.” With Marrow, a soul and gospel singer, and McPhail, a jazz and blues singer, facing acoustic difficulties in Grace Cathedral’s sanctuary, it became evident that the vocal traditions they represented and performed, in addition to Ellington’s orchestral jazz, did not emerge from within the large communal spaces of elite American mainline Protestantism, where constructing high, ornate ceilings was within financial reach for these denominations. These vocal and instrumental styles emerged from alternative black religious and social spaces—rural churches, urban storefront churches, apartment rent parties, and dance halls—where their sounds were less likely to reverberate down long sanctuary halls or to dissipate among the rafters. Social distances became evident in the unintended sonic dissonances. And ironically, cathedral performances that occasioned racially

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significant candid photographs belied the acoustic difficulties present during live performances that may have muffled Ellington’s interreligious and interracial messages. Over the course of the three Sacred Concerts, Ellington would modify the tones, tempos, and voices he used in his music to create sounds more audible within these elite white religious spaces. As Ellington worked to speak about, to, and for God through his music, the theology he conveyed over the three concert tours also reflected personal changes in tone over time.

“In the Beginning, God”: Duke’s Divine Descriptions

“In the beginning, God,
In the beginning, God,
In the beginning, God,
No heaven, no earth, no nothing…”

For Ellington’s First Sacred Concert, the opening of the King James Version of Genesis 1:1 represented his musical theme, “In the Beginning, God”—at first a wordless, “personal statement” with six tones symbolizing “the six syllables in the first four words of the Bible” that Ellington and his ensemble repeated “many times…many ways” throughout the performance.

Following the instrumental performance of this theme on the album version is the voice of Brock Peters (1927-2005), the African American actor recently famous for portraying Tom Robinson in the 1962 movie version of Harper Lee’s novel, To Kill a Mockingbird. Following this statement,

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45 “First A. M. E. Zion Church, Brooklyn, N.Y. presents Duke Ellington in a Concert of Sacred Music, March 10, 1966,” Ruth Ellington Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History; Series 5: Performances and Programs, 1963-1989; Box 5, Folder 2 (Duke Ellington’s Concerts of Sacred Music material, 1965-1968). In a 1968 Sacred Concert program text draft, Ellington wrote that these four words had greater ecumenical and individual value as a “personal statement” than if he had chosen any particular denominational creed: “I base the major theme of these sacred programs on the first four words of the Bible: ‘In the beginning God…’ Because whatever church we’re appearing in, the people there can understand these words and the feeling they give. It becomes a personal statement, not a doctrine. / Personal things are the important things in life: love is personal, music is personal, communicating is personal.” See “Untitled Draft, p. 2,” carbon copy. Ruth Ellington Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Series 6: Lyrics, Scripts and Notes, 1939-1986, Box 7, Folder 9 (Miscellaneous Notes, 1974).
the song takes an up-tempo swing beat, and Peters provided a list of objects and concepts familiar to the audience that were not yet in existence, effectively requesting that the concert attendee (or album listener) pause to contemplate a state of existence where God is the sole presence. For Ellington, to stop at the words “In the beginning, God” and its implication of pre-primordial divine existence was to capture an assertion he found sufficient for religious reflection, praise, and worship. The double negative at the end of “No heaven, no earth, no nothing” conveyed both a colloquial African American phrasing and the belief that even nothingness or nonexistence was absent when God was the only being. Following the Peters section, the choir shouts the names of the books of the Hebrew Bible alongside a solo by alto saxophonist Paul Gonsalves. After a pause to applaud Gonsalves, a dramatic fanfare introduces an ascending trumpet solo by William “Cat” Anderson. After Anderson’s final high note, Ellington states, “That’s as high as we go,” to audience laughter and applause for Anderson, capturing the musician’s sonic limits—despite his virtuosic gifts—as a reflection of human limitation in praising, approaching, or even apprehending the divine.

Neither the biblical acts of creation nor God’s creative capacities are Ellington’s principal foci with this personal statement—to contemplate God’s eternal existence aside from any other created order engenders Ellington’s musical celebration. In a rough copy of his Sacred Concert program text, Ellington wrote, “In the beginning, we only existed in the mind of GOD, and so GOD, very graciously, shared with us a life of our own.” These notes and Ellington’s hotel

46 Janna Tull Steed writes that this listing of Hebrew Bible and New Testament books indicated “the likelihood of an early Bible memorization assignment [for Ellington]—as does the changing, in order, of all the names of all the books of the Bible in the development of the piece.” See Steed, Duke Ellington: A Spiritual Biography (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999), 145.
stationery reveal that while traveling, he made constant attempts to characterize God in his own language, and he debated the precise language others employed to capture the nature of God for his songs. In one private hotel moment, Ellington expressed a definition of God through personal experience with the natural world: “I Can Hear GOD Anytime / I Can Feel GOD in the Sun Rise / the Smell & the Taste / of the Wind & the Sea / MAKES ME See GOD When I Close My Eyes.” At other times, Ellington turned to religious literature to encounter other conceptions of God within Christian traditions. Some of this literature he acquired from clerical fans, and he sustained an engagement with it in the process of composing his three Sacred Concerts.

As a public representative of receptivity to religious belief, Ellington became a repository or vessel for others’ more pronounced and firm religious commitments, and they sent him religious materials as gifts in order to persuade him to join their religious communities. For Ellington to express divine belief without adhering to any particular Christian denomination meant that others were willing to send him scriptures and religious literature to compel him in particular theological directions. Ellington’s apparent openness left him vulnerable to accusations of insincere piety and superficial belief, as stated previously. But such openness also made him likely to forge new religious relationships that became friendly correspondences, some of which fed into the Sacred Concerts. Ellington’s collection of religious literature reveals that a profession of religious commitment in twentieth-century America did not seal the individual off from the reality of competing religious commitments, which may even have appeared as the well-intentioned proselytizing of others who admired the popular jazz musician and sought to

48 “The Baltimore Hilton, Baltimore, M.D.” Duke Ellington Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Series 5: Personal Correspondence and Notes, 1941-1974; Box 6, Folder 1 (Notes, undated).
welcome him into their particular fellowship. Nevertheless, Ellington received these gifts as clergy encouraging him to create sacred music “not as a matter of career, but in response to a growing understanding of my own vocation.”

Several religious books that Ellington received during his Sacred Concert years simply served as gifts of appreciation following concert performances, bearing no visible markers that the composer had read, annotated, or even opened them. He received a copy of *Sabbath Songs for Congregational Singing*, adapted from the Central Conference of American Rabbis’ Union hymnal. The Christian Science writer Frank A. Salisbury sent a copy of Mary Baker Eddy’s *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*. From the Unitarian minister Richard Gilbert and Presbyterian minister Kenneth Neigh, Ellington received a copy of *The Blue Denim Bible: The New Testament in Today’s English Version: Good News for the Modern Man* with the inscription, “To the Duke—who is the real ‘Good News’ to men and music! Agape[.]” From the Canadian Roman Catholic priest, Gerald Pocock, Ellington received copies of F. C. Happold’s *Prayer and Meditation: Their Nature and Practice, Good News for Modern Man: The New Testament in Today’s English Version, The Psalms of the Jerusalem Bible* (a birthday gift in 1969), and *The Catholic Hymnal and Service Book*. Following the 1968 premiere of Ellington’s Second Sacred Concert at New York’s Cathedral of St. John the Divine, Episcopal Bishop James A. Pike sent a copy of his book, *A Time for Christian Candor*, addressed to “Duke and Evie” and signed by Pike, his family and friends praising Ellington’s musical statement about his faith (see figure 5.3). After a November 1970 concert performance, Ellington received a copy of *The Jerusalem Bible: The Psalms for Reading and Recitation* from Rabbi Meyer Heller of Temple

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Emanuel in Beverly Hills, California. Ida Joseph Atwood, a Chicago minister in the National Spiritualist Association of Churches, sent Ellington a copy of *Divine Remedies: A Textbook on Spiritual History* from the Unity School of Christianity, with creased page ears for sections dealing with throat and lung ailments (likely her attempt to aid Ellington in the early 1970s after his battle with lung cancer became public knowledge).\(^5^0\)

Of the religious literature in his collection, Ellington read *Destined for Greatness*, a booklet by Life Messengers, “an evangelical non-profit organization” based in Seattle,

Washington. Life Messengers, a publishing ministry founded in 1944 by Moody Bible Institute graduate Ray W. Johnson and his wife, Vera, also published *The Last Days Bible*, which focused on premillennial evangelical concepts of the impending apocalypse. Destined for Greatness is an apologetic narrative tract, with “Dr. Fronkby” at the center of the encounter over proof of God’s existence and the literal reliability of the Bible. Dr. Fronkby is a scientist who is convinced of God’s existence and biblical infallibility, and he engages a group of students who challenge his rationale behind evangelical Christian commitment versus modern science’s presumed opposition to it. Dr. Fronkby fielded students’ various questions: John asked, “…[I]f there is a God and He created everything, who made God?” followed by “But why didn’t God reveal something about how He came to be?” John persisted. ‘If He does exist why hasn’t He explained His existence? Maybe I could believe if He would explain His own beginning.’ [bold in original]” Ellington drew a question mark and circled it next to this passage. In response to Steve, who asked Dr. Fronkby, “But why is God so secretive about His beginnings?” Ellington wrote, “HOW DARE WE” at the page bottom, and at the top of the next page he wrote, “WE DON’T UNDERSTAND ALL THINGS ON EARTH – TANGIBLE.” In his response to this series of questioning, Dr. Fronkby speaks of God’s beginning: “What He has chosen not to reveal is none of our business.” Here, Ellington bracketed this sentence and wrote “GOD” on top of “He”, placing this sentence, which he considered a compelling response, in his preferred theological language. Similarly, Susan’s question to Dr. Fronkby about the concept of the Trinity and God permitting Jesus Christ’s substitutionary atonement (“[W]hy didn’t He show His

great love for us by coming Himself instead of sending His Son to suffer? Why didn’t He suffer for us instead?”) irked Ellington, as evidenced by the addition of a question mark to the paragraph and the writing of “STUPID” after Susan’s question.53

Precise language to address directly and to speak about God was a paramount concern for Ellington, as expressed in his writings on hotel stationery. An Ellington stationery writing at the Hilton in Jacksonville, Florida adds texture to his expressed frustrations with the exchange between the fictional Dr. Fronkby and the students:

What Made You Think *(That)* You Can Use the Word HIM
Why Do You Refer to the Almighty as HE
When You Pray *(First Person)* How Dare You Address the LORD as YOU
Him, You & He
Are Correct When Addressing Me54

Addressing an unspecified believing subject, Ellington adopted privately a tone of frustration with the commonplace usage of masculine pronouns and titles to refer to God. Ellington even made an attempt to craft lyrics for a tune, titled “There is No Pronoun Good Enough for GOD,” which expressed his belief that regal addresses like “His or Her Majesty” and “Your Highness” for royals or “Your Honor” for a judge fall short of adequacy when speaking to the divine.55 A Washington, D.C. reflection expressed his lament over the absence of sufficiently exclusive language: “With So Many *(Educated[,] Brilliant) People (Scholars) With Such Highly Developed Vocabularies – In So Many, Many *(Sophisticated) Languages & Not One, Who Think[?] of a Worthy Pronoun.” When referring to God, the archaic “thou” and capitalized

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54 “Jacksonville Hilton, Jacksonville, FL,” Duke Ellington Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Series 5: Personal Correspondence and Notes, 1941-1974; Box 6, Folder 1 (Notes, undated).
55 “Downtowner/Rowntowner Motor Inns, location unknown,” Duke Ellington Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Series 5: Personal Correspondence and Notes, 1941-1974; Box 6, Folder 1 (Notes, undated).
masculine pronouns were apparently insufficient for Ellington. “GOD is Beyond Gender” was Ellington’s declaration at the end of this note.⁵⁶

To consider the supreme deity “Beyond Gender” was, at base, a clear statement relegating gendered language to the created, material world. However, this particular phrasing is likely significant in Ellington’s usage, given his history of considering others “beyond” standard classification. For other artists, to be “Beyond Category” in the jazz world was to bear Ellington’s highest praise. Fellow musicians Mary Lou Williams and Ella Fitzgerald received this veneration, with the latter artist receiving a musical tribute when Ellington and Billy Strayhorn composed “Portrait of Ella Fitzgerald” with a third movement titled, “Beyond Category.” It is likely, therefore, that this assertion of a genderless deity is simultaneously Ellington’s insistent assertion of God’s superiority to gendered descriptions and an expression of high religious praise.

The evidence of this descriptive theological assertiveness would not appear as an explicit message in any of the songs from Ellington’s three Sacred Concerts. However, Ellington created a symphonic composition titled “New World A-Comin’,” inspired by Roi Ottley’s New World A-Coming: Inside Black America, a Peabody award-winning book on African American society. Ellington’s “New World A-Comin’,” with the composer’s spoken-word introduction in the 1970 orchestral album recording, envisioned a future where “there will be no war, no greed, no categorization, no nonbelievers, where love is unconditional, and there is no pronoun good

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enough for God.” Ellington included his solo piano performance of “New World A-Comin’” in his First Sacred Concert series.

The composer pursued the use of terminology to address and describe God that could not apply to any other subject or concept. This must have been a constant thought process for Ellington while traveling, for his poetic reflection in San Antonio, Texas describes his pursuit of such elusive language:

My Dear GOD I’ve Been Searching
Searching For the Word or the Phrase
that Cannot Be Use[d] [for?] any Purpose
& Has Not Been Used Through All the Universal Days

My Dear GOD I’ve Been looking,
Listening, looking & Trying to Find
An Eligible light of Semantics
that’s Right For the One God Divine

When Speaking to or Of My Dear GOD
There’s Not One Pronoun
that Hasn’t Been Used for Others
& Not One That Hasn’t Been Used I’ve Found

Whereas with music, Ellington was able to find or create a phrase, theme, or melody to express a particular concept, mood, person, or group of people, he appeared frustrated by his inability to do likewise with existing language about the divine. Additional reflections in Greensboro, North Carolina and Baltimore, Maryland indicate that Ellington momentarily considered the exclusive use of the first person pronoun by God—and God alone—acceptable. He declared “The Only Pronoun Good Enough for God is ‘I’ When used in the FIRST PERSON” at one moment, and he also wrote, “There is only ^ (the) ONE Pronoun / good Enough

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58 “Ramada Inn Roadside Hotel, San Antonio, TX,” Duke Ellington Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Series 5: Personal Correspondence and Notes, 1941-1974; Box 6, Folder 1 (Notes, undated).
For GOD / & It Can only Be Use[d] By the ONE / GOD – I AM.” Relegating the address of
God to God’s self may have served to convey the essential ineffability Ellington felt in his
reverence for the divine. The practice of generating such written statements about God may have
even served as acts of private worship for Ellington. However, this work would not suffice for
Ellington’s attempt to capture the worshipful rhetoric of believers in the God of the Hebrew
Bible for the songs he was composing. The Baltimore reflection in which Ellington refers to
God as “the ONE” reveals an attempt to employ a numerical pronoun to address the Almighty,
and a reflection in Honolulu, Hawaii reveals Ellington’s seemingly meditative attempts to spell
out this form of reverence (see figure 5.4).

Ellington had used “the One” to refer to God in a composition predating his three Sacred
Concerts. In 1963, he composed a stage play, My People, what he deemed a “social
significance” work intended for a children’s audience during the height of the civil rights
movement—reminiscent of the pageants from Ellington’s childhood like W. E. B. Du Bois’s The
Star of Ethiopia. This play was broadcast so that black children, the larger white American
viewership, and a wider European audience would know that “there are Negro doctors, lawyers,
businessmen, nurses, teachers, telephone operators, policemen, and housewives” worthy of
admiration. One of the particularly religious compositions for this broadcast was titled, “Ain’t
But the One,” performed by Ellington’s orchestra and featuring the lead vocals of Jimmy
McPhail and the backing vocals of the Irving Bunton Singers. Employing the familiar call and

Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Series 5: Personal Correspondence and Notes,
1941-1974; Box 6, Folder 1 (Notes, undated).
60 “Ilikai Wakiki, Honolulu, HI,” Duke Ellington Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History,
Series 5: Personal Correspondence and Notes, 1941-1974; Box 6, Folder 1 (Notes, undated).
61 Cohen, 395.
62 Cohen, 393.
response singing of black gospel music, “Ain’t But The One” reflected Ellington’s strident monotheism through a recording of God’s activity as chronicled primarily in the Hebrew Bible, invoking events that would have been familiar to any African Americans attached to the tradition of music derived from African American spirituals. But the lyrics for “Ain’t But the One” made use of implied pronouns (and interrogative pronouns) when describing God, effectively serving Ellington’s frustration by evading their usage altogether. McPhail and the Irving Bunton Singers alternated choruses of “Ain’t but the One (just One)” when describing the “one good Lord above” or the “one great God of love.” McPhail spoke of a God who “made a serpent wiggle from a walking stick / made a snake out of a cane,” and he asked “who set the stars (sun and the moon)?” and “who knows the judgment (just who)?” without the use of “He.”

Ellington later incorporated “Ain’t But the One” into his first Sacred Concert, thereby conveying to religious audiences nationwide his appraisal of the African American Christian musical tradition while subtly omitting the use of the masculine pronoun most Christians associated with God.

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63 Edward Kennedy Ellington, *Duke Ellington’s My People*, © 1992, 1963 by Legacy Recordings, AK-52759, Compact disc. The line “Snatched Jonah, yes He did, from the belly of the whale” contains the masculine pronoun to refer to God. However, Ellington’s manuscript lyrics for this song do not include “yes He did,” appearing instead as “Snatched Jona / From the belly of the whale.” This indicates McPhail’s original improvisation of the line. Nevertheless, this inclusion of exclamatory speech acknowledges the importance of this way of testifying about God in African American Protestantism. This composition existed prior to his composition of the Sacred Concerts, and aside from the performance of the 1958 version of “Come Sunday” in his concerts, which includes masculine pronouns to refer to God, it is the only instance of the use of “He” in Ellington’s original Sacred Concert lyrics. See “My People by Duke Ellington: Ain’t But the One (p. 5),” Duke Ellington Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Series 5: Personal Correspondence and Notes, 1941-1974; Box 8, Folder 12 (Handwritten Notes, Etc., Queenie Pie).

64 For the *We Love You Madly Tribute* to an ailing Duke Ellington in 1973, Ray Charles and Aretha Franklin re-imagined Ellington’s “Ain’t But the One” by setting his lyrics to the basic structure of their song, “Spirit in the Dark.” The song includes not only an organ, electric guitar, and a mass gospel choir behind Charles and Franklin, intimately familiar with the idioms of modern gospel music, but it also contains a “praise break” showcasing these two musicians’ improvisational spirit. This reworking of the song represented Franklin and Charles affirming the theological content of Ellington’s lyrics as sufficiently representative of African American Christianity. However, their version uses the pronoun “He” when referring to God. Coupled with their musical arrangement, which supplants Ellington’s as a more authentic representation of modern gospel music that is conducive to Pentecostal worship practices, Charles and Franklin translate Ellington’s message into the words and sounds most familiar to the black Christian communities with which they were well acquainted. These changes also simply signal generational and religious differences between musicians—Ellington had not been a church-attending religious person, and his
Besides use of “the One,” Ellington composed “Supreme Being” for his Second Sacred Concert, an epic song similar to “In the Beginning, God” in its focus on the Hebrew Bible’s Genesis creation narrative, but relying primarily on the choir and soloists’ spoken word following an arranged instrumental opening:

Supreme Being!
Supreme Being
There is a Supreme Being
There is one, only one, one Supreme Being
Out of lightning, thunder, chaos and confusion

The Supreme Being organized and created
Created and organized heaven and earth

[...]
Supreme Being.
The immortal creator and ruler of the universe, eternal and all-powerful
Supreme Being
Called God!”

To speak repeatedly of one “Supreme Being” allowed Ellington to marshal many familiar religious descriptors for this divine concept, contemplating this being and its attributes for over four minutes, before the chorus reveals (by building to an exclamation) that it is also “called God!” But it also allowed him to signify that the capitalized word “God” that many English-speaking monotheists use to refer to this “Supreme Being” inevitably fell short of fully capturing the divine object of reverence. In this instance, more words rather than fewer were necessary for Ellington to represent to the listener the particular, epic biography of this entity of utmost existence.

Why wasn’t “Jesus” a sufficient noun? Language about Jehovah, Yahweh, the Holy Ghost (or Spirit) is absent from Ellington’s hotel stationery reflections. Similarly, Jesus’s name appears once. According Harvey Cohen, a 1958 interview revealed that Ellington regularly wore a gold cross under his shirt but also that he “almost never spoke about Jesus Christ directly, either in conversation or in the lyrics for his sacred compositions.” In his first Sacred Concert,
the gospel singer Queen Esther Marrow stated in “The Lord’s Prayer” that she was “beggin you, Jesus, to give me more grace / I need your power to help me to run this race” before improvising on the New Testament “Our Father” prayer. It is possible that Ellington granted Marrow the improvisational freedom to use her preferred divine language; nevertheless, the almost total absence of the name Jesus or the title Christ from Ellington’s compositions is significant. Two exceptions are possible allusions to Jesus in “Ain’t But the One” and “Tell Me It’s the Truth.” In “Ain’t But the One,” McPhail’s line “Made the cripple walk and the blind man see” refers to two acts of Jesus that the New Testament gospels provide, although this lyrical presentation also allows for attribution of the healings to the power of God. “Tell Me It’s the Truth” references “the Gospel truth,” because “the truth is the light and the light is right”—and to Marrow’s “right?” Ellington answered, “right.”68 However, Marrow appears to sing “Tell me it’s a truth” in the Grace Cathedral premiere and on the album version, despite the album version’s song title and versions by other Sacred Concert singers since.69 Throughout the song, the singer appears in need of assurance that something is either true or “the truth,” and the allusion to Jesus as either the biblical “truth” or “light” is possible but unclear. In both cases, Ellington elected to avoid direct mentions of Jesus or Christ.

A rhyming reflection written in Houston, Texas serves as Ellington’s attempt at a proverb, imitating a Shakespearean line from *The Merchant of Venice*: “It’s a Wise Man Who Knows His Father / It’s a Wise Man Who Knows His Son / It’s a Wise Man Who Knows that

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68 Wilbert Hill writes that “Tell Me It’s the Truth” is an example of Ellington incorporating characteristics of 1950s and 1960s gospel music in his First Sacred Concert, namely, “…use of the tambourine, triple meter, a simple harmonic progression, call and response, and idiomatic orchestration of the gospel style accompaniment part supporting the melody sung by a contralto.” See Wilbert Weldon Hill, “The Sacred Concerts of Edward Kennedy ‘Duke’ Ellington,” PhD diss., The Catholic University of America, 1995, 76. In some Sacred Concert dates, Jon Hendricks (b. 1921) is the vocalist for “Ain’t But The One.”

69 This appears to also be the case on the *Duke Ellington at Fountain Street, April 17, 1966* recording.
GOD / & that GOD is the One and Only One.”70 A Christianity Today profile of Ellington possibly shed light on these theological absences:

His Washington, D.C. boyhood was filled with sermons and Sunday school, but Ellington has rarely attended services during his career and never joined a church. At 23, with a jazz career beginning to bloom, “I began to read the Bible for myself, to see what there was. I have my own idea, and I think it makes sense.” This idea strays from the orthodox belief on the Trinity, but he is conservative about the Bible itself. “I believe the whole story,” he said. “I am always in a position to have it out with people who say the Bible contradicts itself. I’m not a formal Bible student, but I can correct people on things like that.”71

While the profile offered no specific stances Ellington many have had regarding the idea of God existing simultaneously in three persons, it conveyed the musician’s confidence in his own ability to comprehend, interpret, and defend biblical scriptures without conventional clerical guidance. The article glossed the prospect of Ellington’s unitarian personal theology, which may have explained his frustration with the fictional student questioning Dr. Fronkby about God suffering in Jesus’s crucifixion. Rather, the article’s focus was on Ellington’s affirmation of the existence of God. Christianity Today’s mission was to promote a more conservative evangelical Christian voice in print magazine culture than the mainline Protestant magazine, The Christian Century. Ellington’s Sacred Concerts proclaimed belief, and the defense of believing was sufficient for those religious participants like Ellington who elected to operate within an interfaith world. However, the lyrics of his compositions never expressed the particular belief in the resurrection, atonement, or divinity of Jesus.

As with religious booklets and pamphlets that easily accommodated his itinerancy as a traveling musician, hotel stationery captured momentary religious exclamations, assertions, and

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70 “The Shamrock Hilton, Houston, TX,” Duke Ellington Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Series 5: Personal Correspondence and Notes, 1941-1974; Box 6, Folder 1 (Notes, undated).
71 “Jazz Goes to Fifth Avenue Church,” Christianity Today vol. 10, no. 8 (January 21, 1966), 42.
attempts to work out convincing poetry and prose about God for a musician whose career was anything but stationary. Additionally, pamphlet and booklet religious literature suited women and men confident in their ability to interpret religious scriptures (or to confirm religious authors’ interpretations). These two vehicles served Ellington as he fashioned himself an evangelist for the idea of believing, and his Second Sacred Concert in particular demonstrated his relatively assertive support for belief.

“Something ’bout Believing”

“Do you,” a questioner probed, “consider yourself a religious man?”
“I don’t know what a religious man is,” the artist replied. “There are a lot of people in the world who demonstrate their religious belief more than I do but I don’t know any who are more serious in it than I.
“I say my prayers regularly, I believe in them and I believe I am helped.”

Was Ellington certain about the existence of God? Ellington represented a conception of divine belief in his Second Sacred Concert. But this statement about belief followed his engagement with Christian religious literature representing attempts to characterize the meaning of having faith, or committing to matters ultimately unverifiable or not yet confirmed by human experience.

At times in private, Ellington played humorously with the idea of explaining the limits of certainty (and of cognition) regarding faith, writing “I Know that there is So Much that I Know I Don’t Know…But I Don’t Know How Much There is that I Don’t Know that I Don’t Know I’m Ignorant of.”

As Ellington reflected during one stay in Fort Wayne, Indiana, “Any ^{(SO CALLED) GOD That Can Be Proven or Identified By Shape, Size, Colour, Sound, Action or

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73 “The Detroit Hilton, Detroit, MI,” Duke Ellington Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Series 5: Personal Correspondence and Notes, 1941-1974; Box 6, Folder 1 (Notes, undated).
Reaction is Not a GOD at All—or Rather is Not GOD—”74 Here he appeared to embrace a basic uncertainty attendant with the limits of human knowledge, despite the prospect of scientific advances. Perhaps, then, to locate God in the historical Jesus was, for Ellington, to mistakenly or imprecisely identify God with a finite, material, gendered body.

With a draft of his text for second Sacred Concert’s booklet in 1966, Ellington elaborated on his belief that with respect to God’s existence, “that which is possible is possible until proven impossible.”75 In this instance, Ellington provided God a location within the universe that affirmed his previously-mentioned doubt about anyone defining God empirically: “Not a little bit here, or a little bit there, God is Total, everywhere.” Consequently, he argued that professing the nonexistence (or demise) of God was logically fruitless:

There is no such sentence as “GOD is dead”. Anyone who says the first word immediately nullifies the balance of the sentence. GOD is all-specific—nothing can be added, positive or negative. Nobody can make GOD—nobody can make GOD prettier, better-larger-more powerful—nobody has eyes good enough to stand and look at GOD. GOD causes things to happen that we can see—hear-smell-taste-or feel—GOD causes things to happen that make all the other—I don’t know how many—sensitivities react.
Believing is a matter of profound intent, so, don’t say to me ‘Show me GOD’—because I can’t, and neither can anybody else. Such talk and questions, the most ridiculous stupidities. There are many things that most everybody believes that they cannot see.
God and the enemy subversive—we can’t see either one, but we know they are here in the U.S.A.76

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74 “Holiday Inn of Fort Wayne, Fort Wayne, IN,” Duke Ellington Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Series 5: Personal Correspondence and Notes, 1941-1974; Box 6, Folder 1 (Notes, undated).
These statements about the impossibility of God’s nonexistence did not end up in the Sacred Concert program booklets in his archival collection. However, Ellington’s lyrics for “Something ’bout Believing” express this same sentiment, in a portion where the vocalists are monotone and emphatic: “The silliest thing ever read / Was that somebody said, ‘God is dead.’ / The mere mention of the first word / Au-to-ma-ti-cal-ly e-li-mi-nates the se-cond and the thiiiiird.”

Ellington’s confidence in his musical form of theological reasoning became evident when he chose portions of “Something ’Bout Believing” as the text for his annual Christmas card—a recurring practice for sending holiday greetings to his family and friends in the music profession and beyond (see figure 5.5). Ellington’s Third Sacred Concert in 1973 included a composition, “Ain’t Nobody Nowhere Nothin’ Without God,” that featured the vocalist Toney Watkins cautioning, “One more word / Before I am dismissed / If you don’t believe in God, / Then brother, you don’t exist” and the repeated phrase “Ain’t nothin’ nothin’ without God.”

Ellington kept a clipping of “The Greatest Gift Man Can Possess,” a column by newspaper writer and Christian author Jim Bishop that the Hearst-owned King Features Syndicate, Inc. originally published in 1958. Bishop’s column addressed the very concept of faith in God in the absence of proof of God’s existence: “Faith implies an absence of proof. You

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77 Ellington, “Something ’bout Believing,” Second Sacred Concert. The song’s vocalists included the AME Mother Zion Church Choir, Central Connecticut State College Singers, Choir of Saint Hilda’s School, Choir of Saint Hugh’s School, and the Frank Parker Singers.


have [faith] or you do not. If you do not, then you have cancer of the soul and you will end up believing in nothing, including yourself.” Bishop’s concern in the piece was to reflect on coping with the death of a loved one and being uncertain of the existence of heaven. A general concept of faith in all human relationships was to flow from faith in God. And Bishop advocated reliance on the biblical accounts of God’s promise of eternal life predicated upon the individual’s belief: “It’s not necessary to be a divine to understand God and what He expects of us and what He has promised. All one needs is a small degree of literacy and an open mind.” But the piece, adopting mainly a persuasive tone, also conceded the limits of proving divine or eschatological existence: “Faith is the most easily reviled of all the virtues. I can read the Bible and you can tell
me that it is phony and I cannot prove that you are wrong.” While Ellington did not mark this newspaper clipping in any manner, it comported with his statements about faith and he kept it inside one of his many religious pamphlets.

Ultimately, message tone mattered to Ellington. A ripped-up score sheet from 1969 reveals an attempt to rebuke those without faith like Ellington, where he wrote in capital letters, “IF YOU DON’T BE-LIEVE WHAT THE BI-BLE SAYS SHAME ON YOU” and “YOU DON’T BELIEVE THAT GOD’S IN HEAVEN SHAME ON YOU” (see figure 5.6). Ellington decided against reprimanding his potential audience, opting to employ a tone in songs like “Something ’Bout Believing” that affirmed the feeling that faith produced within himself and his eager anticipation of encountering fully God’s presence one day.

But what about the God’s heavenly abode, central to Christian tradition in anticipation of a resurrected future for a faithful humanity? Ellington addressed the concept of heaven with two songs he wrote for Swedish vocalist Alice Babs (1924-2014) in his Second Sacred Concert. His description appears to be rooted in how he personally imagined heaven to exist as if he were to inhabit a child’s youthful, imaginative anticipation of this afterlife. In “Heaven,” Babs sang eight lines twice (while alto saxophonist Johnny Hodges played the melody in between her verses): “Heaven, my dream / Heaven, divine / Heaven, supreme / Heaven combines / Every sweet and pretty thing / Life would love to bring / Heavenly heaven, to be / Is just the ultimate

degree to be.” Another Alice Babs performance in this concert, titled “Almighty God,”
featured clarinetist Russell Procope playing the melody after her verse, with Babs providing her
soprano scatting over the melody as it continued through the choir’s verse:

Almighty God has those angels a-way out there above,
Up there a-weaving sparkling fabrics just for you and me to love.
Almighty God has those angels up in the proper place,
Waiting to receive and to welcome us and remake us in grace.
Wash your face and hands and heart and soul, ’cause you wash so well,
God will keep you safely where there’s no sulphur smell.
Almighty God has those angels as ready as can be,
Waiting to dress, caress, and bless us all in perpetuity.\textsuperscript{83}

\textsuperscript{82} Ellington, “Heaven,” \textit{Second Sacred Concert}.
\textsuperscript{83} Ellington, “Almighty God,” \textit{Second Sacred Concert}. “Almighty God” lyrics copyright © 1993 by Music Sales Corporation (ASCAP). International copyright secured. All rights reserved. Used by permission. To add weight to
Together, these two songs may reflect Ellington capturing what it meant for him to be a young child imagining and eagerly anticipating life beyond earthly existence—and perhaps children were Ellington’s intended audience for these songs. In a televised 1969 performance at the Gustav Vasa Church in Stockholm, Sweden, Alice Babs sings the lyrics to “Heaven” with eyes closed, appearing to inhabit the role of the believer who imagines with joy the prospect of eternal existence. While Hodges plays, Babs also smiles and gazes upward and around the cathedral, appearing to picture the celestial place that Hodges articulates with his musical solo.  

The lyrics for “Heaven” and “Almighty God” are fanciful, and at times comical with “Almighty God,” wherein a particular reference to hell as a place with a “sulphur smell” is the only allusion to the concept of eternal damnation in any of Ellington’s three Sacred Concerts. But the “Almighty God” lyrics speak of a God who provides guardian angels, tasking them with fashioning a beautiful paradise and refashioning the souls who come to inhabit it. These poetic lyrics register less like Ellington providing a statement of belief in the afterlife and more like Ellington employing a playful tone with his musical descriptions.

However, Ellington may have believed in an eternal existence after life on earth, and one of his personalized holiday cards after 1970 conveyed this belief (see figure 5.7). Ellington

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the stance that Ellington entertained seriously the concept of heaven, there were lyrics written on hotel stationery likely serving as an initial draft of “Almighty God”: “All the Angels Rejoice / When a Sinner Repents / & they Are Waiting / to RECEIVE Greet & Welcome / Him to Heaven.” Ellington’s regard for himself as both a “sinner” and a “believer” may be evident with these lyrics addressing heavenly reward as the outcome for personal repentance. Although the absence of specific language about the nature and form of this confession would have left it open enough for a receptive interfaith audience, if Ellington had used these lyrics, it would have also left unknown the precise meaning and form of repentance for him. See “The Edgewater, Madison, WI,” Duke Ellington Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Series 5: Personal Correspondence and Notes, 1941-1974; Box 6, Folder 1 (Notes, undated).

84 The concert is listed as “Praise God And Dance” for Sverige Radio at the Gustav Vasa Kyrkan in Stockholm, Sweden on November 6, 1969, date of telecast unknown, in Timner, 408.
made a general pronouncement about all human inclination toward religious feeling, identifying “the validity of the foundation of religion” in the “HEAVENLY ANTICIPATION OF REBIRTH”—a phrase Ellington borrowed from a prayer the Roman Catholic priest Gerald Pocock wrote for him.\(^{85}\) Eleven movements form The River, Ellington’s suite for an Alvin Ailey ballet that premiered in 1970, and with it he anthropomorphized a river that begins as a spring

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\(^{85}\) Writing, “Duke—God bless you always[,] Gerry Pocock,” Pocock sent Ellington a card with the following printed prayer: “GOD, OUR FATHER, LOVING SOURCE OF BEAUTY AND DELIGHT, WITH YOUR GIFT OF GOODNESS, BLESS THESE MUSICIANS, THEIR FAMILIES AND THEIR FRIENDS. MAY THOSE WHO LISTEN TO THEIR SONG REJOICE...FOR WHEN WE SHARE THE BEAUTY OF YOUR MELODY, THEN, IN GOODNESS AND IN TRUTH, TOGETHER IN FREEDOM, WE CAN DISCOVER OUR TRUE SELVES AND ALL YOUR LIFE OF LOVE HERE AND NOW — AND IN ANTICIPATION OF HEAVENLY RE-BIRTH.” Duke Ellington Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Series 5: Personal Correspondence and Notes, 1941-1974; Box 5, Folder 1.
and ends up in the sea, only to evaporate, condense, and precipitate as a reborn spring. The cycles of genesis, transformation, dissolution, and material reformation in the natural world reflected and anticipated, for Ellington, the remaking of human existence in another realm—and if paired with Ellington’s more playful “Almighty God,” humanity’s remaking by God’s angels “in grace.”

When Ellington chose to annotate his religious texts, they revealed his affirmation, questioning, or frustrations with the author’s claims. Ellington owned Paul S. McElroy’s *Quiet Thoughts*, published in 1964 by the Peter Pauper Press. In a section titled “The Providence of God,” Ellington underlined passages on faith: “To believe in the providence of God means to be anchored in those realities which are timeless.” And “Rather than being an optimist or a pessimist, the man of faith is a realist, a man with the strength to look at the changing world and see God at work bringing renewal and healing in the midst of decay and suffering.” Ellington drew a large X over a subsection titled “How Big Is Your God?” writing “This is Not to be questioned!” Despite McElroy’s contention in this paragraph that human conceptions of God have changed over time, the mere stating of the question appears to have annoyed Ellington. An assertion of certainty marks Ellington’s marginalia in *Quiet Thoughts*, substituting “is” for “comes” in McElroy’s sentence, “There comes a time when we have to accept on faith the things about which we lack knowledge.”

When Ellington did engage with formal Christian theology, he did so through the literature of James Thayer Addison (1887-1953), Episcopalian author and comparative religion

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scholar. What resonated with Ellington in the Episcopal prayer tradition was an emphasis on the forgiveness of corporate sins. With Addison’s writings on the Episcopal “General Confession”\textsuperscript{88} in The Living Sacrifice, Ellington indicated the importance of shared responsibility for social transgression: “For in this general confession when we say, ‘we bewail our manifold sins,’ we speak not as a collection of individuals pooling, as it were, the separate burdens of our insulated lives. We speak as a corporate group confessing in common a weight of sin that we bear in common—all the ugly evils of society. They are evils for which I am not responsible nor you, but evils none the less for which before God we are answerable.” Ellington also underlined several corporate sins that Addison listed, indicating the appeal of Social Gospel Christianity to his conception of confession: “Dangerous or unhealthful housing conditions that breed disease, ill managed prisons where cruelty hardens criminals, remediable poverty and unemployment with all their waste of potential human values, the whole festering business of prostitution, the kind of destructive insanity that war has now become—these are only a few of the corporate sins in penitence for which we declare that ‘the remembrance of thee is grievous unto us.’”\textsuperscript{89}

It is also with Addison’s work that evidence of the nature of Ellington’s appreciation of Jesus emerges. On the Christian New Testament and its essential teachings in relation to following the Liturgical calendar, Addison wrote:

This exposition of Christianity in more than ninety collects, epistles, and gospels might have been presented topically, classified in groups of thoughts and ideas.

\textsuperscript{88} The text of the General Confession reads: “ALMIGHTY and most merciful Father; We have erred, and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against thy holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; And we have done those things which we ought not to have done; And there is no health in us. But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us, miserable offenders. Spare thou those, O God, who confess their faults. Restore thou those who are penitent; According to thy promises declared unto mankind in Christ Jesus our Lord. And grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake; That we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life, To the glory of thy holy Name. Amen.”

That is how we should find the material in a book of philosophy or ethics. It is profoundly significant, however, of the true nature of the Christian faith that these lessons are not so arranged... They are not planned according to a system of thought because Christianity is not a set of ideas. They unfold the birth, the life, the death, the resurrection, the ascension, and the coming in power of the Lord Christ because Christianity is an historical religion growing out of the ‘mighty acts’ of God in Christ and expressing and perpetuating itself in a Church which is the Body of the living Christ. While the teaching of Christ and His apostles is an indispensable factor, apart from which faith would be blind and conduct without a guide, what is unique and essential in Christianity is the Incarnation, and that is a supreme fact embedded in history. So it is not merely for its pedagogical or psychological value that in the Holy Communion the New Testament comes to us under the form of the Christian Year. It is because the Christian religion is centered in a Person.

The New Testament, then embodies not a philosophy of life, but a Gospel, and a Gospel means good news, and news is always about events that have happened. Thus it is that Christianity is here presented in an historical framework so that every year we follow from humble beginning to triumphant end the course of His life in whom dwelt the fullness of the Godhead bodily. And the culmination at Pentecost is the good news that an ascended Christ is not a lost Christ, but a Christ who lives within His Church and irradiates it with His divine energy.

A lack of annotation does not necessarily indicate Ellington’s opposition to this framing of Christian teachings. However, Ellington’s selective underlining reveals what he thought essential about the Christian religion. While Ellington did not underline the passage about the resurrection of Jesus or the statement that dwelling within the life of Jesus was “the fullness of the Godhead bodily,” he did affirm the centrality of incarnation earlier in the text, possibly indicating an appreciation for the concept of Jesus as “God the Son,” or the more general idea of God existing among humanity. Ellington underlined a later passage where Addison argued for the distinctiveness of God in the Christian tradition, in contrast to Judaism and Islam: “…The God we adore so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son to suffer death upon the

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Cross for our redemption.”

Hasty annotating may explain reasonably Ellington’s omission of “we,” “His only,” and part of the word “Cross” from his underlining, for these words appeared at the ends and beginnings of new sentence lines; nevertheless, this annotation demonstrates Ellington’s appreciation of the central Christian narrative of the crucifixion for humanity’s salvation. It is also noteworthy that there are no visible markings to indicate that Ellington took issue with Addison’s use of masculine pronouns to address God or Jesus. Lastly, Ellington appreciated passages on the Eucharist characterizing Christian salvation as a call for Christians to become like Christ when he existed as the human Jesus (and a similarly inconsistent but potentially unproblematic underlining of the middle of sentence lines existed with these paragraphs):

“But the Christian is right who will not accept the Sacrament as a mere memorial, as that and nothing more. Though the death of Christ has its indispensable place in God’s work of forgiveness and redemption, that redemption cannot be wrought for us by a single act in the past, even though the actor be God’s Son Himself. For salvation is a process in which the activity of God in Christ is continuous and which calls for cooperation on our part. In other words, what Jesus of Nazareth did for us on Good Friday must be realized and brought to fruition by what the living Christ does in us today and tomorrow. In this Sacrament, therefore, remembrance grows into participation.

…We are met together not in the absence of One who once lived and died but in the radiant presence of One who uses the elements of physical life to impart to us His own life through which alone we can grow into His likeness.”

The potential appeal of this phrasing is that it places Jesus and the Christian onto the same plane of human activity, with God tasking both subjects with implementing God’s will on earth. In Communion, Jesus as Christ serves as the “radiant presence” symbolically passing the charge of

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God’s earthly work to successive generations of Christians. In this Episcopalian light, Ellington’s affirmation allowed him to commit to Christian ethical practice and ritual without necessarily resolving, for himself, the nature of the divinity of Jesus.

A clearer picture of an Ellington who had reverence for God and Jesus emerges from his study of Episcopalian literature. Why Jesus remained absent from Ellington’s song lyrics and themes remains an interesting question, given the clearer articulations of God and God’s angels in the composer’s messages. Moreover, the Holy Spirit suffers the same omission. It is possible that Ellington held a Trinitarian-like appreciation for the other two persons in the Godhead, but that he decided to act in the interest of an ecumenical and interfaith presentation of his music and to focus on the monotheistic commonality that Protestants, Catholics and Jews maintained. It is equally possible that God truly was “the One and Only One” for Ellington, and he wrestled with revering the life and ministry of Jesus in his private religious study while intentionally omitting the mention of Jesus from his sacred compositions.

The Episcopal publication *Forward Day by Day: A Manual of Daily Bible Readings*, which Addison edited, is responsible for “It's Freedom” in the Second Sacred Concert and was likely influential in Ellington’s more contemplative Third Sacred Concert compositions.93

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93 In “It’s Freedom,” Ellington extolled the deceased Billy Strayhorn’s life according to the “four major moral freedoms” by which Ellington stated he lived: “I often think of freedom as it was enjoyed by Billy Strayhorn…Freedom from hate, unconditionally; freedom from self-pity; freedom from fear of possibly doing something that might benefit someone else more than it would him; and freedom from the kind of pride that could make a man feel that he was better than his brother.” Ellington, “It’s Freedom,” *Second Sacred Concert.* With “It’s Freedom,” Ellington also expressed the desires for social change represented in the African American civil rights struggle and the broader decolonization struggles of the mid-twentieth century. Of this song, Alice Babs stated: “The things you read about Black Power. I hear this number and I could cry…It’s hard to believe how such things can be. They want freedom now. They can’t wait any longer. So much talk…When I sing ‘Freedom’ I feel I have to change also. We have to change. We need to free ourselves of the thoughts we harbor about other races. When I heard ‘It’s Freedom’ I was happy. I told myself this would be performed all over the world. It says something the world has a need to hear. Duke has written, ‘Freedom is not just a word, Freedom is something we have to have.’” *Jazz Journal*, August 1968, p. 3; excerpt printed in Stuart Nicholson, *Reminiscing in Tempo: A Portrait of Duke Ellington* (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1999), 380-381.
Ellington became acquainted with *Forward* through his friendship with Ethel Rich, a professor of speech and drama at Milton College in Wisconsin and an Episcopalian who was responsible for Milton College awarding Ellington an honorary degree. Ellington wrote background scores for Rich’s production of T. S. Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral*, and she began sending him a copy of the Episcopal publication four times a year. “Ever since I saw the first copy,” wrote Ellington in his memoir, “this book has been my daily reading. It is very clear, easy to understand, written in the language of the ordinary man…and it has played a great part in the adjustment of my perspective on the approach to the relationship between God and the human being.” Ellington even looked forward to using the booklets to construct musical lyrics more appropriate for a Mass than his two previous sacred concerts, where the message was directed at attendees, not at the divine: “One maybe accustomed to speaking to people, but suddenly to attempt to speak, sing, and play directly to God—that puts one in an entirely new and different position.”

In the 1969 edition of *Forward* (from May 1 to July 31), the Friday, May 16 reflection on Matthew 8:8-10, in which Jesus heals the centurion’s servant because of his faith, resonated with Ellington. The passage conveyed that the centurion sought Jesus as an act of faith, despite presumably knowing little about him. The passage then cast a skeptical gaze upon avowed agnostics, asserting from an Episcopal viewpoint that acting out of love makes an individual receptive to faith in other unproven concepts, like the existence of God. Ellington underlined

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passages that comported with his disdain for a lack of faith, revealing his initial stance that love is ultimate in existence and, consequently, synonymous with God:

Though we sympathize with honest agnostics there is a point at which agnosticism becomes selfish. When we look honestly at the world we see both love and hate, joy and sorrow, light and darkness. What really is at the heart of the universe—goodness or evil (or nothingness, which is as bad as evil)? The only way to find out whether love is really at the heart of the universe is to base one’s life on the ultimacy of love. If the agnostic doesn’t give love a try he is not really honest. He can’t know whether love is true unless he tries it. If he does he won’t be an agnostic for very long. For to the man who bases his life on the primacy of love Jesus can speak, just as he spoke to the centurion, a man whose faith grew out of his love for his servant.”

The next day’s passage on Matthew 8:13 continued the centurion story, with Jesus pronouncing the servant as healed in this verse. In this reflection, Ellington underlined the statement, “love led to faith and faith led to more love,” which claimed that the centurion’s initial love for the servant compelled him to seek out Jesus, who “used the man’s faith to manifest the love of God.” The lesson continued: “Jesus said, ‘Many foreigners will sit at my table in the Kingdom…but those who should have belonged to the Kingdom will be banished.” Jesus is not interested in our respectability or our ancestry. He wants us to be loving and faithful, as the centurion was. We know he will find centurions wherever people care about people—centurions striving to break down the barriers which divide the races, seeking to eliminate the scourge of poverty, working lovingly for the Coming of Christ’s Kingdom.”

The Episcopal articulation of this account presents it as a socially just tale; however, Ellington particularly appreciated that the commentary offered a connection between love and belief when acting.

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The Sunday, June 29 passage on Matthew 25:31-46 conveyed that whenever Jesus taught about a future Judgment Day, he related it to the “here and now” to teach lessons for the disciples’ lives. God’s concern on Judgment Day would not be about theology, purity, morality, or respectability—it was to be the way one treated and cared for those in need. Ellington drew a double-border around the last paragraph, isolating its message that love was God’s means of connecting earthly life to existence beyond it: “How quickly did Jesus bring us down to earth! If Judgment Day, if the after-life, if heaven and hell, if eternity mean anything at all that meaning is directly related to those immediate earthly lives we are living out together here and now. Love is the only link between time and eternity—the love which is aware of hunger and thirst and poverty and loneliness and gives of itself to assuage all suffering.”

The aging Ellington must have looked forward to the prospect of eternal life, and the Wednesday, July 9 passage on John 15:7-10 saw him affirming the words of Jesus when he promised, “you will dwell in my love.” Ellington underlined a portion of the passage’s last sentence, “I love you as the Father loves me,” placing special emphasis in this moment on the God who loved Jesus.

Conclusion: Three-Letter Word?

By 1973, Ellington’s “personal statement” about God had become a musical question, with the composer asking, “Is God a Three-Letter Word for Love?” in his Third Sacred Concert. This concert premiered at Westminster Abbey in London in part as a tribute to the United Nations, but because of Ellington’s declining health due to lung cancer, he did not tour it as extensively as with the first and second concerts. For the concert performance at the African

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American Saint Augustine Presbyterian Church in the Bronx on December 23, 1973, the program booklet contained the song’s lyrics—normally sung by Alice Babs, but regularly by DeVonne Gardner (b. 1945) in the concert’s U.S. tour:

Is God a three letter word for love?
Is love a four letter word for God?
When Love is in the air, do you know that God is there?
When roses bloom in May, didn’t God plan it that way?
Is God a three letter word for Love?
Is Love a four letter word for God?
God Almighty, whether former or latter really doesn’t matter.
’Cause Love is of God, and God above is the King of Love.100

For a song whose major improvisational voice is Ellington’s piano (primarily in the background), the explicit vocal message presents the interchangeability of two concepts: the supreme deity and an affective state of being. Ellington’s lyrics suggested that the composer felt no extreme difference between love and God, or that uttering either one word or the other in conversation was effectively the same speech act. He wrote in one of his private reflections, “When You WE Call a Friend Love Are We Not Wishing them GOD’s Blessings[?]” In another, he provided a rhyming couplet: “The Domain of GOD / is Universe Beyond End / the Beginning is LOVE / & Only GOD Knows When,” followed by a definitive statement, “NO SHADOWS.”101 If the earlier Ellington of 1965’s “In the Beginning, God” wanted people to focus on the moment when God was the sole existent presence, was this later Ellington of 1973 asking that believers imagine that supreme, originating presence to be conceptually equivalent to love?

Gerald Pocock authored Toney Watkin’s speech in the song’s second part, supported by the choir vocalizing the tune’s melody:

Questions, answers, strange replies,
Proclamations, truth and lies
Let me ask, and tell me now
What’s important? Why? And How?
Is God a three-letter word for love
For all that is goodness below and above?
Some seek a new life, but who will reply?
Who cares if the truth will live or die?
The best of all treasures we have is today
On the time, and the life, the truth, and the way
So why should you think that this question is odd?
Is love a four-letter word for God?

Pocock later repeated this message, “The best of all treasures we have is today” in his lengthy written condolences to Ellington following the November 1973 death of Arthur Logan, his longtime friend and personal physician and friend since 1936.102 Pocock provided the familiar cross symbol he used in several of his letters to Ellington, closing with “GOD/LOVE bless you always……Gerry,” revealing that the Roman Catholic priest and the composer shared private reflections where they blessed each other employing this conceptual manner of speaking (see figure 5.8).103 This message became so important to Ellington that he chose the GOD/LOVE cross for one of his holiday cards in the early 1970s (see figure 5.1).

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102 According to his son, Mercer, following Ellington’s lung cancer diagnosis, Logan’s sudden death was a serious and painful shock: “First of all, he had lost a tremendously close friend; second, he had lost the only person in medicine he really trusted. There were not many people with whom he had so close an attachment or that kind of relationship, especially among men. Billy Strayhorn, like most of his other close friends, had already passed away….So as Pop cried for Arthur Logan he cried for himself, all through the night…For the next two or three days he unashamedly went through moments of mental hysteria. He just couldn’t cope with the idea that Arthur was gone. He felt Arthur himself had not profited from the advice he always used to give him, and that was not to worry.” See Mercer Ellington and Stanley Dance, Duke Ellington in Person: An Intimate Memoir (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1978), 198.

Perhaps “Love” allowed Ellington to avoid the linguistic frustrations he felt earlier when attempting to address his God properly. Ellington ultimately lifted the idea from his Ambassador Hotel stationery writings for another composition, “The Majesty of God,” sung by Alice Babs and the John Alldis choir:

The beauty of God is indescribable.
The power of God is unappraisable.
The sight of God is unimaginable.
And one should know that the light of God is Truth
And does not a shadow throw.

The wonder of God is the future of futures.
The splendor of God is the Heaven of Heavens.
The Domain of God is universal beyond end.
The beginning is Love and only God knows when.  

This later Ellington focused more on physical demise and the possibility of an afterlife following the deaths several close friends, musicians, and his own failing health. The music tempos for Ellington’s final Sacred Concert were not as fast as some of the joyously exuberant numbers of the first and second concerts, like “David Danced Before the Lord” and “Praise God and Dance.” The mood of many third concert songs appeared much more subdued and pensive.

As the circumstances of Ellington’s life changed in the 1970s, so did his musical temperament and apparent attitude about expressing the idea of God. His sacred music represented an attempt to craft new religious sounds, and his presence in various houses of worship indicated the prospect of interracial fellowship and the creativity it was able to produce if more Americans committed to integration and welcomed African Americans into their religious spaces. Championing a general belief in a supreme deity reflected his genuine commitment to ecumenism and also revealed his deep engagement with defining and representing belief in such a concept in private. For Ellington to pose an ultimate question about love was to pursue a divine connection that was not necessarily mediated by an engagement with the atonement of Jesus. To proclaim divine ineffability in public songs and private writings was both a product and practice of personal religious wrestling.

Endowed with the trust of many ministers and religious institutions to present a statement of faith, Ellington made use of these public settings to serve as an African American representative of religious fidelity who was privately in the constant process of working out the nature of that belief. Although granted a unique opportunity, Ellington’s wrestling reflects the individual lives of many religious adherents and troubles the assumption that an individual’s commitment to religious institutions, assent to doctrinal statements, or participation in religious rituals implies a shared, uncomplicated understanding of those spaces, languages, actions, or
objects of reverence. The following chapter on Mary Lou Williams explores another jazz musician’s sense of personal religious calling that resulted in her work to forge a position of unconventional religious leadership and race representation.
I was in my hotel room alone and all of a sudden it seemed as though everything I had done up to then meant absolutely nothing. I was despondent because everything seemed so meaningless and useless.

Even my beloved music, the piano I played, all seemed to have lost their appeal. So had my former associates in show business, the musicians, the night club owners and the wealthy men and women who were my patrons and who had been dining and wining me—none of them seemed important any more.

...In my efforts to get through to God, I felt great relief. For the first time in days, the cloud lifted and I began to feel like living again. I asked God which way I should go. I told Him I was tired of the life of sin I was living and of trying to make my way without divine guidance. I told God that day of prayer that I wanted to do something for Him, to serve Him, even to giving up my music and all else I was doing that was ungodly in His sight.

—Mary Lou Williams, “What I Learned from God about Jazz,” *Sepia*, April 1958
Introduction

When the jazz pianist, composer, and arranger Mary Lou Williams (1910-1981) decided to become a Roman Catholic, she engaged in several critical conversations: with God, with Hazel Scott (1920-1981), with Lorraine Gillespie (1920-2004), and with two jazz-loving white Catholic priests, and with several other jazz musicians. Williams also engaged in conversations with various publics—a black public, through African American print publications, and with the professional jazz public, whose musicians she claimed had lost their creativity in the modern musical era. This first group of conversation partners compelled her return to performing and composing music, aided by her new Catholic clergy friends who urged her to reconsider the jazz profession as remaining worthy of her divine musical talents. Williams expressed the hope that her conversations with the professional jazz world would prompt meaningful conversions for them, and she argued that the fruits of this labor would be the revival of black musical creativity. Like Williams, any musician who established a conversational relationship with God would receive creative musical inspiration: “If you want to do anything, build a house, be a good parent, earn a decent living, play jazz or classics or religious music, you have to have inspiration through prayerful communication with God because the gift of creativeness comes from Him.” Communication with God was a resort for those black musicians who may have lacked creativity but, more importantly, lacked employment and playing opportunities: “Our musicians who complain that they cannot find jobs and that everything is blacked out for them, should pray and then watch things open up for God answers all prayers.” Unrealized creativity for jazz musicians, and the material insecurities it produced, became Williams’s chief concerns, which she sought to remedy through religious care. Following Charlie Parker’s death, Williams served

1 Mary Lou Williams, “What I Learned from God about Jazz,” Sepia (April 1958), 60.
as a co-chairperson of the Charlie Parker Foundation, established to support the late musician’s children. A memorial concert for Parker, featuring Williams, Dizzy Gillespie, and others, raised $10,000. This success inspired in Williams a desire to establish an organization for struggling musicians and children, which she named the Bel Canto Foundation.²

To raise funds for the Foundation, Williams opened a thrift shop to sell second-hand goods, including luxury items, to New York City’s low-income patrons (see figure 6.1). As Williams reflected in an interview, the thrift shop came to occupy a place in her daily routine, at first alongside nursing musicians in her home and attending Catholic worship services:

I’d meet the musicians and like if anybody was hung up I’d take them into church and I’d teach them to pray, how to do the rosary beads. I used to sit in the Lady of Lourdes. I’d go to the mass in the morning, 7 o’clock mass, and sit through all the masses. I’d get out about 9 or 10. I’d come home and fix lunch for all the poor people I had in the house I was feeding. I’d go right back and meditate a couple hours and then I’d come home. I was from the house to the store to the church.³

Eventually, Williams ceased housing musicians in her apartment to focus her efforts more fully on fundraising for her Foundation and managing the store (although she continued to provide for their convalescence elsewhere).⁴ In part, the Bel Canto Foundation story in this chapter is about an African American woman managing a business, attentive to her income and influence. But

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³ Smithsonian Institution Interviews with Jazz Musicians: Williams, Mary Lou; Institute of Jazz Studies, Rutgers University, Jazz Oral History Project 117.5.5, Transcript, 156.
⁴ Jazz Oral History Project, 160. In 1964, Williams revealed, “I put the worst cases in a room down the hall from my place I rent cheap from a neighbor. They stay a couple of weeks, and I talk to them and pray with them and help them get a job. But I can be very hard in my charity, and sometimes I tell them, ‘You’ve got to be a man. Stand up and go downtown and get a job. No use lying around Harlem and feeling sorry for yourself.’ Sometimes they come back in worse shape and ask for money, and sometimes they get on their feet. One boy I’ve been helping has a job at Gimbels, and he’s doing just fine. I’ve also sent musicians to the Graymoor Monastery, near Garrison. Brother Mario [Hancock] there has been a lot of help to me.” See Whitney Balliett, “Profiles: Out Here Again,” *The New Yorker*, May 02, 1964, 78-80.
others have represented the Bel Canto Foundation as a story of failure, born of Williams’s insufficient income and experience. According to Williams biographer Linda Dahl, critics of Williams’s efforts to establish the Bel Canto Foundation regarded the thrift shop she managed as “more a place to socialize than to do business.” Dahl even quoted Williams’s friend and later manager, Father Peter O’Brien (1940-2015), who stated, “She was not tough enough to run a business.” Dahl characterizes her donation standards and practices as unfeasible and unwise: “All an applicant had to do was give his name and address to receive a small check from Mary. This of course could not, and did not, last long.” Ultimately, this critical assessment stemmed from the negative reflections of Williams’s friends and fellow jazz musicians, who watched Williams care for other musicians with extreme devotion but found her religious exhortations off-putting:

Some musicians refused to humor Mary. Miles Davis respected Mary’s musicianship (several years later he admitted to her, “I should have asked you to be in my band”); but he also mockingly called her “Reverend Williams.” Others, says Lorraine Gillespie, “started running when they saw her coming—she was always trying to get them to go in the church and pray.”

“She was like a bag lady—not crazy, but odd, running here and there with bags of groceries, trying to help these strung-out musicians,” recalls Helen Floyd. “People laughed at her, you know.” Her apartment was like a homeless shelter, with musicians convalescing in her living room…

Undeniably, the Bel Canto Thrift Shop failed as a sustainable business. However, the overwhelmingly negative assessments of Williams’s work on this project from the late 1950s through the 1960s deal insufficiently with the worth of her daily effort to manage her shop, her finances, and to aspire to realize a support system for musicians in need and, thereby, forge a

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5 Dahl, 294.
6 Dahl, 265.
7 Dahl, 255.
new sense of community between jazz artists and broader societies. Dahl’s sources for analysis of the Foundation effort and management of the thrift shop did not include the musicians who were recipients of Williams’s charity. The primary voices are those who financed Williams’s initial mission efforts (ultimately at a loss) and those who sought to refocus her attention on composing and performing new jazz music. Williams, ever the meticulous record-keeper, maintained many of the documents related to her Foundation efforts that reveal moments of promise, setback, progress, and failure. These documents also provide a record of several musicians who experienced Williams’s charity, regardless of the Foundation’s ultimate fate.

This chapter probes the worth of establishing and maintaining the Bel Canto Foundation for Williams, the professional jazz musician, convert, and African American woman, by examining the persistent diligence of an entrepreneurial (and Catholic) newcomer whose primary musical profession likely prevented established social service organizations, prospective financiers, and Catholic authorities from taking her efforts seriously enough to support her mission robustly. This effort to establish the Bel Canto Foundation represented tensions for Williams the musician. There was the fundamental tension in managing her professional output (traveling to perform and produce new music) versus managing her Bel Canto Foundation’s daily affairs (the local operation of her thrift shop and maintaining correspondences with potential donors). However, there was another tension for Williams the successful African American jazz professional. While she was a newcomer to the Roman Catholic faith, she was anything but a novice in her musical profession. Williams had charted a path to prominence within one jazz community, confident in her ability to manage a substantial project like this Foundation because she had secured revenue for herself through the ongoing retrieval and management of her composition copyrights. Consequently, she strived to become more than a
regular parishioner in her new Catholic community. She attracted the friendship of many Catholic priests and enjoyed retreats with Catholic women religious, like the Cenacle Sisters Convent in Lancaster, Massachusetts. These were relationships where Williams sought conversation and prayer partners about matters mundane, grave, and lighthearted; yet she also actively sought the Catholic hierarchy’s legitimization of the moral work she began prior to her formal conversion, partially through the Church’s financial investment in her entrepreneurial efforts. The Catholic authorities she befriended, however, were fans of Williams the prominent jazz artist, not necessarily Williams the charitable organization executive. They encouraged her to put her full energies into developing her music (in particular, developing her concept of “sacred jazz”) rather than treading this unfamiliar professional territory.

This chapter locates personal and communal meaning for Williams in her professional failure. It renders Williams’s rigorous daily activity tangible through the exploration of her business archive to contest the portrait of her work from 1958 to about 1966 as insufficient, amateurish folly and a distraction from her more laudable, musical pursuits. With this material, this chapter also demonstrates how Williams practiced and articulated her personal beliefs—it makes one African American, Catholic convert, jazz woman’s meticulous labor visible while also making her business records legible as a brand of print culture documenting her religious work. Rather than isolating and excising Williams’s pursuit of a Bel Canto Foundation as an eccentric preoccupation during her years of religious maturation, this chapter incorporates her daily labor into her conception of a divine call (while Williams and her Catholic friends contested the specific nature of this call).

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8 See Mary Lou Williams Collection, Institute of Jazz Studies, Series 3: Personal Correspondence, Subseries 3D: Correspondence with Religious; Box 20, Folder 14 (Sister Martha Morris: Correspondence, 1967).
Through an attempt to restructure a community of African American jazz artists and their supporters, Williams pursued charitable social work as the institutionalization of personal accountability. She attempted to institutionalize personal habits of supporting others in order to aid musicians who experienced many of the frustrations with their profession that she knew well. This was a translation of personal practices, prior to her Catholic conversion, into the language of charitable organizations, following her Catholic conversion, as recognized by the governmental bureaucracy—a strategy not unfamiliar to many Christian denominations in the United States. Her ultimate goal was the production of “good sounds” for rehabilitated, creative African American jazz professionals.

The chapter begins by providing the personal tragedies that Williams stated led to her belief in God, her entrance into Roman Catholicism, and her initial articulations of a unique calling to religious leadership within that tradition. The second section illuminates Williams’s call for practices of care and accountability within the jazz community in order to safeguard God’s gifts of creative African American music and musicians. The chapter then shifts to the incorporation and management of the Bel Canto Foundation, bookkeeping and daily operation of the Bel Canto Thrift Shop, and the members of jazz community Williams relied on for fundraising and material donations. The final two sections explore correspondences with charitable professionals, and those in need of Bel Canto’s charity, as Williams both faced challenges in managing her foundation and worked to construct a system of accountability in her aid to others.

**Embrace of a Catholic Calling**

This chapter’s epigraph demonstrates that despondency and meaninglessness, emotionalism and discontentment were the frames that Williams provided in 1958 to articulate
her pursuit of religious transformation, six years after her hotel experience in Paris, France. Before 1952, this African American female jazz instrumentalist enjoyed consistent professional success over nine years, beginning as a member of Andy Kirk’s otherwise all-male big band and then as a successful solo artist and head of a trio. This fame included the “after-dark beat” of the musician who claimed she had done it all, “…the hustle and bustle, the drinking and balling, the staying out all night…” of the jazz clubs that served as the spaces of her artistic profession.⁹

Williams expressed that she was ill at ease with herself. In this 1958 Sepia magazine article, for an African American readership interested in consuming stories of black culture and leadership, she narrated a process of religious transformation that covered time (three and a half years), travel over two continents (the United States and Europe, through France, England, Switzerland, Holland and “other Low Countries”), and solitude (relatively reclusive habits of intense prayer). A successful jazz career in the 1950s presented a moral dilemma for Williams, now believing that God was revealing that she no longer belonged in this professional realm. The night club was where her profession lied, but its temptations were what she wished to avoid. There must be a reforming of the self in order to navigate this space and her compatriots, and she needed to reconsider the worth of her professional output in order to make it worthy of her personal devotion to God.

Williams was also personally frustrated with the death of jazz saxophonist and composer Charlie Parker (1920-1955), her friend whose musical creativity she encouraged in forging “bebop,” along with trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie and pianist Earl Rudolph “Bud” Powell (1924-1966). Having returned to the United States from Europe in 1954, and familiar with Parker’s heroin addiction, Williams received word in 1955 about Parker’s declining state from her

⁹ “What I Learned from God about Jazz,” 57.
brother, Jerry, who spotted him leaving Harlem Hospital. Since she often cared for musicians in her Hamilton Terrace apartment, Williams relayed to Parker through Jerry that he should “come by the house.” Unfortunately, Parker died a few days later. According to Tammy Kernodle, this loss made Williams despondent about the state of the jazz community and its music, given its demonstrated inability to provide care and safety nets for others:

[Charlie Parker’s] death symbolized for Mary everything she thought had gone wrong with the jazz scene and the larger black community. Personal accountability and responsibility to the community had been replaced by an attitude focused on the individual and on personal advancement. Apparently no one had considered intervening with Parker; those around him simply distanced themselves when his behavior became too much to bear. Some fed his chemical demons in order to anesthetize or control him.11

In addition to caring for fellow musicians upon her return to the United States, a period of religious exploration saw Williams engaging in calling others to encounter God through her street evangelism with her friend, an African American dancer named Laurence “Baby” Jackson (1921-1974). Williams recalled: “I was working with [Jackson] who became a preacher at 15th Street and Seventh Avenue in a church there. He was snatching people off the street baptizing. You know what really happened during that period? A lot of musicians and dancers became preachers and they began to preach. They must have gotten the same thing.”12 Jackson, who had his own personal struggles in and out of prison and maintained correspondence with Williams while incarcerated, sympathized with her disdain for the music industry throughout the early

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10 Jazz Oral History Project, 144. After she stopped performing at Café Society, Williams regarded her apartment as “...a headquarters for young musicians.” She stated, “I’d even leave the door open for them if I was out. Tadd Dameron would come to write, when he was out of inspiration, and Monk did several of his pieces there. Bud Powell’s brother, Richie, who also played piano, learned how to improvise at my house. And everybody came or called for advice. Charlie Parker would ask what did I think about him putting a group with strings together, or Miles Davis would ask about his group with the tuba—the one that had John Lewis and Gerry Mulligan and Max Roach and J. J. Johnson in it. It was still like the thirties—musicians helped each other, and didn’t just think of themselves.” See “Profiles: Out Here Again,” 67.
11 Kernodle, 167-177.
12 Jazz Oral History Project, 146.
1950s. Jackson’s prison writings to Williams reveal personal correspondences that entangled expressions of personal friendship, romantic admiration, assessments of musical mastery, and beliefs in divine inspiration and guidance in their lives. Studying several photos Williams mailed to him, Jackson told her that he believed “the ‘God Head’…destined you to be a profound figure in the field of musical expression” and that her “independence of mind and soul” equipped her “with the immoveable ability to meet fate and circumstance on equal terms and laugh at the threat of self-destruction from over-passionate indulgence in temptation. Where I have been weak, you have been strong.” The power he found in her work came through suffering, as he was discovering that one cannot understand life without such struggle. Nevertheless, he optimistically quoted Romans 8:18 to her: “For I reckon that the sufferings of this time are not worthy to be compared to the glory to come.”

Williams left Jackson and evangelism “after I began praying in the Catholic church.” Before Williams became an official Catholic church member, however, she carried into her encounter with Catholicism a sense of individual authority over her reception of the “several religions” she explored, likely fostered in conversations about God and professional talent with musician confidants like Jackson and others. Williams maintained correspondence with Gérard “Dave” Pochonet (1924-2000), a French drummer who convinced her to cease performing while she was overseas and to join him at his grandmother’s countryside home. In a lengthy romantic (but ultimately unrequited) correspondence with Williams in 1955, Pochonet pleaded

14 Jazz Oral History Project, 146.
15 Kernodle, 169.
that despite their subjective concepts of God, they shared a sense of religious duty and practice that he felt made them truly compatible:

Please be kind; and don’t worry, I do believe in Him. But how two persons of different age, education, or whatever makes them different, could have exactly the same conception of Him? You depend on your own feelings for a great part in this conception. To me, God is great, good, and helpful. He has built me the way I am, I try to use his gifts to be a decent people [sic] in my life.

And I do consider that it is not the mere profession of a creed, but righteous conduct, along with sincere praying, which is true religion.16

Although Williams did not pursue a romantic relationship with Pochonet further, this correspondence reveals that Williams took her dedication to praying long hours seriously in addition to her questions about the religious tradition most suitable for her prayerful practices. Writing in her personal notebooks years later, which included Catholic prayers, Williams reflected on the role of Pochonet, his grandmother, and her friend, Hazel Scott, the African-American pianist, singer, and actress (who was also married to Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., pastor of Harlem’s Abyssinian Baptist Church and Harlem’s congressman) who helped her to pursue prayerful communication with God: “You see God works in his own strange way to save our weak souls. He sent two soft spoken people to tell me to pray—these I rejected until arriving in Paris – next approached by H. S. to pray - went straight to store and purchased Bible and stayed with it.. She only could have made me really.”17

Barry Ulanov (1918-2000), the jazz critic, academic, and convert to Catholicism, introduced Williams to Father Anthony S. Woods, a white Catholic priest and jazz fan whom

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17 “God’s Music,” p. 1-2, Mary Lou Williams Collection, Institute of Jazz Studies, Series 5: Personal Papers; Box 1, Folder 11 (Spiral-bound “Stenobloc Helical” notebook, undated).
Ulanov hoped would compel Williams to embrace Catholicism fully, to manage (and reduce) her
cascetic prayer practices, and to cease caring for musicians in her apartment (a habit her friends
regarded as fraught with danger). Eventually, at the urging of Ulanov and her friend Lorraine
Gillespie, Williams and Lorraine began to attend Our Lady of Lourdes church in Harlem and
took classes in religious instruction. During this period of instruction, Williams wrote a letter to
Ulanov in February 1957 that likely exemplified Father Woods’s assessment of her as “an
emotional thinker, a disorganized thinker” in need of proper religious instruction and guidance to
dispel her more “fanatical” expressed beliefs. However, her writings contained not only key
statements that reflected popular theological beliefs in African American religious history,
inclusive of and extending beyond those in black Protestant Christianity that the fourth chapter of
this dissertation examines. Williams also voiced convictions that foreshadowed her principle
concerns about African American musicians and music over the next decade. She expressed to
Ulanov her certainty that “[t]he Negro is the chosen people” with divine gifts, and African-
descended peoples were “Jewish before being stricken” by a curse “through their sins of envy,
ever thoughts & jealousy.” She conveyed a sense of individual hermeneutical authority over
religious scriptures by declaring her certainty that earth and hell were the same place and that

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18 Williams recounted her experience with musicians dealing with substance abuse that involved “[p]rayers and
music,” providing the musicians Psalms to read or music parts to write and play: “Like I had a drummer that was on
[heroin] and his wife timed him. It took him 5 minutes to go home. He’d come [to Williams’s apartment] 8 o’clock
in the morning and I’d just keep him in the house. See, a dope addict, anyone on heroin they’re like a baby. So I’d
keep them with me all day….This guy, it must have been in his mind or something because he was cured so very fast,
but later on I had to take him to someone for injections and whatnot to counteract what he was doing. The first night
I had him here in the house and he began to want a fix and I said, ‘I just wrote a drum part.’ I wrote and I wrote and
I said, ‘Dig this.’ He said, ‘Yeah.’ I said, ‘Well, play it.’ He had a pad, and he played it and he forgot. Every time
that happened I said, ‘Hey,’ and I’d write something else. That worked on him I noticed that night because it took his
mind off completely, or else the stuff they gave him was so weak….The other person was a dealer but they told me
what they were and I kept them. Father Crowley said to me, ‘Listen, what you’re doing is very dangerous.’ I said, ‘I
don’t care as long as I’m helping them, a poor person.’ This other one he got away from it completely.” See Jazz
Oral History Project, 157-158.
19 Kernodle, 186-187.
“the Bible is one-fourth man written—no book is true to form.” Williams also asserted that black musical creativity was evidence of the race’s divine gifts—jeopardized by the lack of creativity she perceived in contemporary jazz music—and that anyone who possessed a divine gift like music would retain it for “all eternity.” She stated that she came to know these truths because her prayer “enabled [her] to receive many gifts of the Holy Ghost (1 Corinthians Chapt 12).” The cultivation of musical talent was critical for Williams, given her professed interpretations in the middle of the 1950s of God’s mission for African Americans. Aware of the stark presentation of her convictions, she justified to Ulanov her practices of prayer while presenting her aspiration for a structure to institutionalize her aid of others:

Forgive me for saying that I know all that is in the books Father Woods had us to buy—sounded terrible after I said it—but Barry I only meant that if one prays the right {way} God will do the rest. That is (I forgot) {you also} have to learn to eliminate evil thoughts (the worst), help the poor, do not listen to or gossip about anyone. Well there’s a crazy routine along with {the} prayers.

I have tried for the last 2 years to lay the story of Noah and the ark on friends and they cannot hear anything (Satan {is} on his last chance, the end is soon & entire America is blocked to good sounds). Whenever God heals or perform a miracle they say I’m crazy, fanatic, a witch[,] anything evil.

Do you understand anything? I had told Father [John] Crowley about a big deal that I’m sure you’d be interested in to help bring back creativeness, healing of mental patients, cancer, and many other diseases. I’d like to stay in the background ’cept for my music. I have an idea that is if John Hammond’s friend Mrs. [Alice] DeLamar would donate her estate. Helping others is another gift I have always had—cannot write or play if there’s no one to help.20

“Good sounds” was a multivalent refrain in Williams’s writings. At times, “good sounds” expressed her conviction that the musician’s sonic environment must be conducive to a contemplative peace with the self, and that American social unrest was its primary obstruction.

At other times, “good sounds” expressed the religious messages she received in her life, during prayer or in conversation with others, and the religious truths she desired to convey to others. But “good sounds” also came to reflect good creative music—Williams was eager for contemporary jazz musicians to produce music that maintained the creative tradition of uplifting African American music.

On May 9, 1957, three months after writing this letter to Ulanov, Williams and Lorraine Gillespie were baptized and confirmed as Roman Catholics.21 When prompted in a later interview on her reasons for becoming Catholic (“But then you finally decided on the Catholic church because it was open, was that the reason?”), Williams replied, “Yes, that was the only reason. Well the other reason is that was the only church that I felt good in, that I could meditate without vibes hitting me in the head.”22 What mattered most to Williams at this time was a tradition that permitted her unhindered prayerful connection to the divine—in this tradition, God in the Holy Trinity and the multitude of Catholic saints who interceded on humanity’s behalf. And as her embrace of Catholicism changed over the years, she sought to maintain her energy and determination to produce a structure for struggling jazz musicians, even against the wishes of her Catholic companions.

**Reconstituting the Jazz Community**

I have known so many people in Jazz. Everybody from Jelly Roll Morton to Baby Laurence. Great, great artists. Sometimes unmanageable, sometimes incorrigible, but so very gifted that [it] is a sin to have neglected them. So many of our great people in music have died sad, unsung deaths. Red MacKenzie, Leo Watson, Clarence Profit, Frankie Newton, Jelly Roll, oh so many that it behooves us to look after those who are left.

—Mary Lou Williams23

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21 Dahl, 256, 259.
22 Jazz Oral History Project, 146.
23 “Release,” Mary Lou Williams Collection, Institute of Jazz Studies, Series 4: Business Papers, Subseries 4L: Bel Canto, ca. 1950-1971, 1977, undated; Box 47, Folder 6 (Benefit Activities [Concert, Rummage Sale, etc.])
For Williams, the argument that jazz music represented an art form and that African American women and men bore artistic gifts had triumphed. “Certainly,” Williams wrote, “it is acknowledged that one of America’s chief contributions to culture is jazz, and certainly the jazz player is one of today’s creative virtuoso [sic].” She declared that the important step was to guarantee the continued creative energies of African American musical artists, providing resources and atmospheres conducive to their flourishing when playing opportunities became scarce. Reminiscent of the patronage support for Harlem Renaissance-era artists in the mid-1920s, jazz musicians who were not part of well-paid, traveling orchestras like Duke Ellington and His Orchestra, or lucrative small groups like Ella Fitzgerald and her trios or quartets, lived precariously when their business was not gainful. “Times have not changed since the days of Hayden, Bach and Mozart,” Williams opined. “Like the musician earlier in the history of music, the creative musician of today needs help and that help must come from the society he benefits.”

In Williams’s estimation, joy was the musician’s gift, the emotional result of innovative, creative jazz: “I think it is pretty well recognized by now that Jazz Music is contributing lots of joy to many people.” Through the critical assertion that the production of jazz music established relationships between jazz professionals and jazz consumers, Williams declared that people were responsible for reciprocating a gift to musicians: “…some happiness and fulfillment must be brought to the Jazz Musicians and the others in that group.” Williams’s return from Europe to Harlem brought her to encounter the reality of fellow jazz musicians unsuccessful in their

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24 Untitled Fundraising Letter, Mary Lou Williams Collection, Institute of Jazz Studies, Series 4: Business Papers, Subseries 4L: Bel Canto, ca. 1950-1971, 1977, undated; Box 47, Folder 6 (Benefit Activities [Concert, Rummage Sale, etc.])
25 “Untitled Fundraising Letter.”
pursuits of happiness (regarding their states of mind, or their material insecurity). As a jazz collective, “[i]t is a sadly misunderstood group. They disappear and nobody knows what becomes of them. Many are in hospitals, in jail, in all kinds of unhappy situations.” Williams regarded it her goal to alleviate musicians’ poverty and personal suffering, deeming them “our people” and wishing to counter the propensity for many to resort to the unnamed “extremes that lead to their trouble.”26

Williams’s professional community contained meaningful relationships beyond blood relations. Before Mary Lou Williams transitioned into what would become her interracial Catholic religious community, she had always been attached to her immediate family and relatives whom her professional success supported. Consequently, she rethought the nature of her relationship to her professional community. Within the community of instrumental jazz artists, she diagnosed a professional neglect of those musicians who needed material sustenance or psychological support. A communal remedy appeared when Williams began to conceive that the jazz community consisted not simply of musicians, managers, critics, and recording executives; the community included fans—particularly, those who could prove sufficient financial benefactors. The music was a gift with emotional potential, and to give music was to provide a service to others. In turn, a community of beneficiaries must provide for its creative element to prevent financial insecurity, alleviate emotional despondency, or nurse and combat hard substance abuse.

Williams sought to instill her jazz community with a sense of accountability. Williams’s orientation toward the communal responsibility of wealthy individuals mirrored her personal habits as a celebrated artist, given her desires for luxuries, on the one hand, alongside the need to

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26 “Untitled Fundraising Letter.”
provide financial support to her relatives on a weekly basis, on the other. Her care for family members represented her sense of accountability to kin, and now was the moment to establish an ethos of accountability by institutionalizing the care of marginalized musicians.

To proclaim this new mission, to institutionalize care and accountability in her local jazz context, Williams’s first effort was to arrange a benefit concert at Carnegie Hall, scheduled for September 20, 1958 (see figure 6.2).\textsuperscript{27} Prospectively, the concert was to feature Williams, jazz pianist John Mehegan, jazz vocalist Anita O’Day, the sixty-piece Xavier Symphony, and others; however, the list grew to encompass many more of Williams’s fellow jazz professionals.\textsuperscript{28} The day of the concert, the “Theatricals” column in the \textit{New York Amsterdam News} promoted her event and vision for a Foundation home: “The idea seems to be gaining support and it’s important to note that the musicians, in devoting their energies and time Saturday night[,] are helping themselves as others would help them….the idea is sound and deserves support.”\textsuperscript{29}

Williams crafted several messages to send to prospective financiers. One letter, titled “Bel Canto Foundation”, proclaimed the name she chose for her organization and contained the many tangible forms of care for these musicians that she hoped to provide: “Helping musicians…may mean merely offering food and shelter. It may mean providing a congenial and creative atmosphere in which to both work and rest. It may mean giving moral support and encouragement during a period of struggle for recognition. It may mean medical aid. Perhaps, all of these things.”\textsuperscript{30} Struggling jazz musicians required material, emotional, and medical

\textsuperscript{27} “For Immediate Release,” Mary Lou Williams Collection, Institute of Jazz Studies, Series 4: Business Papers, Subseries 4L: Bel Canto, ca. 1950-1971, 1977, undated; Box 47, Folder 6 (Benefit Activities [Concert, Rummage Sale, etc.])

\textsuperscript{28} “BEL CANTO FOUNDATION,” Mary Lou Williams Collection, Institute of Jazz Studies, Series 4: Business Papers, Subseries 4L: Bel Canto, ca. 1950-1971, 1977, undated; Box 47, Folder 6 (Benefit Activities [Concert, Rummage Sale, etc.]).


\textsuperscript{30} “Theatricals.”
support, through means that conventional social service avenues at the local level of government did not provide adequately—perhaps, particularly for African Americans.

Williams’s prospects for the Bel Canto Foundation included acquiring and constructing space away from congested, tempting, and deleterious city life:

The foundation must get started. It hopes in the future, to purchase or build a home in the country, away from the noise, pressures and stifling influences of the
city, where musicians, regardless of race, color, or creed may go for a time to find peace and whatever ‘HELP’ they may require to bring us the music we require.

Staffed with medical personnel, and equipped, with all home facilities, as well as work rooms with pianos and sound proofing, this country haven will stand as tangible evidence of appreciation to all musicians, who have and will continue to bring us the music we love.\textsuperscript{31}

The gift of a physical foundation would provide the musician respite, healing, and “a workshop away from the city where he can work and experiment with his creative ideas.” Williams feared that the creative artists and her musical world were “becoming extinct” given the social and professional pressures they faced.\textsuperscript{32} And a center to solve these problems had to be far removed from the social pressures of urban America. In a handwritten document draft titled, “Why Creative [sic] Has Disappeared,” Williams reiterated these concerns for seeking to establish her Foundation, adding that her professional world “is an entity of its own, and because of their sensitiveness, musicians are more susceptible to the outside pressures (and the evils of the ‘rat race’) than other professional groups.”\textsuperscript{33} In her correspondence with Ulanov, Williams conveyed to a fellow artist (since Ulanov was a writer) that “[a] musician, writer—well—anyone in the art world is now exposed to a dangerous enemy in the form of corruption, wicked people etc. which makes it quite difficult to be able to create anything or try and make it in a nowhere world.”\textsuperscript{34}

In a 1973 interview, Williams recalled an instance where she aided bebop pianist Bud Powell, one of her fellow “over-sensitive” musicians who became particularly difficult beyond the excessive alcohol or narcotics abuse that usually impeded his performance:

Bud Powell was really gone; he was out of his mind. Something happened—it wasn’t his drinking or smoking or anything else. I think from my feelings and

\textsuperscript{31} “Theatricals.”
\textsuperscript{32} “Untitled Fundraising Letter.”
\textsuperscript{34} “Letter from Mary Lou Williams to Barry Ulanov,” p. 1.
Bud being around me I think he was over-sensitive, you know. He felt everybody, felt everything because he was so terrific in his music. Usually when he’d get into these things I’d take him home and make him take a hot bath and just put him in my front room and make him sleep. When he got up he’d play like mad and he’d go like mad….At one time Birdland offered me $75 a week to take care of him and all that. I said no, I have to work myself….I couldn’t even have a little baby around the house; he kicked at my little nephew. He let nobody come near me. I said to him, “All right, I’m going to tell [Thelonius] Monk what you did.” Then he’d straighten up. I don’t care what he was doing, if I told him I was going to tell Monk, he’d straighten up.35

Williams attested to Powell’s creative gifts when unhampered by substance abuse or issues of mental and emotional wellness. Powell wrote Williams a poem in the 1940s, titled “The Great Awakening.” She held onto the poem, “pray[ing] that some day, Bud will know how straight he was,” when he wrote it for her:

I was sitting in the garden one late afternoon
   And out of the sky a feather fell
   And not a moment too soon.
I didn’t stop to regard from what source it came
   I only know it lifted me out of the depths of shame.

You see, I never really lived, all I’ve done was exist
   For all the joy I’ve ever known, was from a knife, a gun or a fist.
   I came up the hard way, that is, the boys, a drink and a broad
   But from this moment hence, I’m drawing my sword.
   And I’m going to cut the weed of temptation, before it entangles me,
   And live the way GOD intended, this short and sweet life to be.

Oh, but there’s one thing I’ve not cleared up, and that’s the missing link,
   From whence that feather came, has started me to think.
   And as I look up at GOD’s operation, a school of pigeons flew by,
   It was then that I knew where it came from, GOD had used a spy.36

35 Jazz Oral History Project, 123-125.
36 “All Musicians Are In Need of God,” p. 2, Mary Lou Williams Collection, Institute of Jazz Studies, Series 5: Personal Papers, ca. 1924-1981; Box 2, Folder 20.
Beyond his music, Powell’s poem represented creative possibility, attendant with a professed commitment to God and the avoidance of temptation. Williams sought to communicate to others that they must help create a resource for musicians like Powell to foster their creative energies, rather than exacerbate the struggles she attributed to their personal demons.

For Williams, a musical world as a community must expand to encompass beneficent fans. However, those non-musician fans must also recognize that the musicians represented a specialized class of sorts who required a particular environment conducive to their creativity. Peculiar to this environment was its isolation. A space for contemplation, healing, and musical creativity would necessarily be a space removed from matters of local and national importance that could just as easily influence the content of a jazz musician’s creative production. Williams, possibly reflecting her personal testimony to the benefits of adopting ascetic practices (and her fondness for Catholic retreat homes), expressed the belief that her jazz community required such a detachment from contemporary society. But in her notes and interviews, she also voiced her concern that musicians who were susceptible to the disorienting sounds of the city ultimately produced music that was not healing—rather, it was the sound of social discontent: “Some musicians have allowed themselves to be taken for a ride thru outside ‘sounds’ such as politics, racism, and constantly shifting cults for nondescript fads …”37 She stated she feared that “a strange foreign sound would enter into the strains of jazz and would destroy the heritage, would destroy jazz completely.”38 There was a social cacophony that came with the city and its racialized citizens’ politics. The musician diminished her art if she allowed local or national matters to determine her musical output. The “sounds” of new religious movements within

38 Jazz Oral History Project, 142.
urban black America—such as the Nation of Islam—which had enticed many jazz musicians, struck Williams as another form of noise, albeit an expression of struggles against racism.\(^{39}\)

Williams was not fond of the circumstances that produced racism in America, but she also disdained musicians whose music evinced social protest: “What with all the lust, greed and hate we’re confronted with in the world, let’s remember that music was given to us to make others happy (not to hate)... creative music cannot be born of hatred and prejudice, even with the excuse of a suitable (and perennial) scapegoat.”\(^{40}\) While Williams did not deny the reality of anti-black racial prejudice, she cautioned that Jim Crow was not a suitable muse for creating music that uplifted others. “It is not wrong to fight for justice, to fight for freedom,” wrote Williams in a 1965 *New York Amsterdam News* article. What was wrong was “to absorb the evils that progress,” and people must instead “rid ourselves of evil by becoming charitable.”\(^{41}\)

At the moment when the modern civil rights movement’s televisual imagery, songs and discourse captured national and worldwide attention, Williams wanted jazz music to be free of that discordant social noise.

For Williams, euphony was at the heart of a jazz musician’s personal healing. In her history of jazz, the music evolved from the “lighter and happier side” of African American expression that commenced with enslaved black recreational culture. Anticipating that African American critics would regard her as an “Uncle Tom” for speaking of jazz as “happy music,” Williams expressed her belief that “[f]or every soul no matter how burdened, there is some

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\(^{39}\) In an apparent response to the rhetoric of African American religious movements like the Nation of Islam and the varieties of groups identifying with a Semitic/Hebrew/Israelite heritage, Williams wrote, “Often we speak of the Negro being brainwashed...yet we may do some of it ourselves.” Williams was responding to the ideological influence of more radical African American religious rhetoric in the 1960s upon a generation of black jazz musicians designing musical representations of the desire for social change. Mary Lou Williams, “Whatever Happened to Mary Lou Williams?” *New York Amsterdam News*, Nov 27, 1965, 31.

\(^{40}\) “Why Creative Has Disappeared,” p. 1, 3.

\(^{41}\) “Whatever Happened to Mary Lou Williams?” 31.
happiness. God in the gift of love sees to that.”42 “Sorrow songs” and “happy music” were equally divine gifts. Williams found it imperative to maintain the emotional distinctiveness of the jazz heritage, and she advocated pursuing the control of which social “sounds” surrounded the musician, desiring to eliminate the “talk of no value” that “destroy[s] him and his music” in addition to “making his listening audience neurotics.”43 To transform the disposition of racial angst into music was to tune the audience’s ears poorly to music—and social matters.

“Whatever is inside regardless whether love or hate will reach your audience and show you up as you are,” Williams cautioned.44 The exact date of these remarks is unknown, although it is unlikely that they represented Williams’s sentiments in the late 1950s and perhaps were more indicative of her stance towards the civil rights politics and racial discourses of the late 1960s. It would be equally problematic to ignore the possibility that this writing also represented messaging directed toward a largely white and wealthy potential donor base for the Bel Canto Foundation. This expression of sentiments about racism and social progress for African Americans exuded no sensibility of social radicalism. In part, it reflected disdain toward groups like the Nation of Islam, popularly regarded as pseudo-religious social pariahs, and this may have been strategic messaging on Williams’s part.

The assertion is more likely representative of Williams’s genuine concerns for the well-being of musicians, because her notes reveal her consistent claim that their physical healing required a retreat from the polluting atmosphere of urban America. Williams reflected on her own susceptibility as a professional musician in a 1958 letter to the attorney Herbert J. Bliss. At the recommendation of Father Woods, Williams contacted Bliss for assistance in establishing her

42 “Whatever Happened to Mary Lou Williams?” 31.
Foundation. She conveyed an awareness that others perceived her as “crazy[,] eccentric, ignorant, a fanatic, fool, pest and a goof” for her habits of nursing musicians in her apartment, handing out her money to persons in need, and persistently preaching to those around her instead of returning to the regular performing and recording habits of a professional jazz musician of her stature. She stated that other musicians had stolen her compositions, causing her to become bitter by 1952. This bitterness over her profession lasted throughout her European sojourn until she “reached God” and “got a sound to pray.” Williams also attempted to convey to Bliss the reasonable motivations for her personal charitable behavior, counterproductive to her own financial stability and to the wishes of her Catholic friends and clerical advisers, who pointed her toward more feasible Catholic outlets for charity. Because “no one ’cept an aunt had tried to teach [Williams] about God,” she was thankful that no institutional religion thwarted her perception of a gift to intuit God’s immanence and direction for her life: “Not being forced into religion or church, I have great experiences and am fortunate enough to feel and see many important things about loving God, first…”

Catholic prayer practices supplemented Williams’s stated perceptual connection to God. In her letter to Bliss, she mentioned that she had been reading *Sanctity’s Mother Tongue: An Examination of Silence and Use of the Gift of Speech*, likely at Woods’ recommendation. Cecilia Koehler, Mother Superior of the Ursuline Sisters of Paola, Kansas and author of *Sanctity’s Mother Tongue*, desired that the booklet’s 31 daily meditations address women religious “in very noisy and distracted times.” Meaningful communication and union with the “Divine Spouse” required attention to habits of speech and practices of silence to work against “this life of ever

increasing speed, of radio and video, in a world where everything seems to be designed to keep the mind from reflection even of the simplest kind…“ For Williams, this meant wrestling with the place of prayer and serenity in her life against her inclination toward “still talking, I’m sure too much,” and “doing the same things as far as helping others” that made her “a very bad risk” for agents who could not predict “when I’ll stop to help an unfortunate guy…” Williams was determined that “in helping others, we strengthen ourselves” and that “God works through unselfish people.” However, whenever God worked through the unselfish, “the other bad sound comes through the weaker ones to destroy the good in the strong…and majority of times I’ve had it to reach me through my closest friend, husband or relative.” Evident in Williams’s explanation of her personal practices was this emphasis on sounds—signals to engage in prayer, or voices of negativity. Thus, the meeting of her established charitable habits and her new Catholic contemplative practices produced the pursuit of a foundation geared principally toward the alleviation of African American musicians’ material insecurity and physical suffering. However, her solution to aid jazz musicians diverged fundamentally from the era’s “noisy” political pursuit of broader socioeconomic changes.

**Diligent Daily Devotion**

With the legal assistance of Herbert Bliss, Williams incorporated the Bel Canto Foundation. The Bel Canto Foundation, Inc.’s charter stated the following primary purpose: “To voluntarily assist in relief of every kind and nature to those persons suffering from or exposed to alcohol or drugs in any degree, but primarily to musicians whose health or work is

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48 Kernodle, 190.
affected by alcohol or drugs.” As of August 8, 1958, Mary Lou Williams had established a Bel Canto bank account. The total deposits to the account were $851.75 by August 28. She counted personal withdrawals from this account as loans to herself. A September 23, 1958 bank deposit statement recorded that the Carnegie concert raised $2,922.75, excluding sizable and minor donations totaling $690.00 from jazz pianist Erroll Garner, Dave Brubeck (who could not attend but contributed $10), the noted jazz patroness Baronness Pannonica de Koenigswarter, Evie Ellington, and various judges and doctors whom Williams knew. This total existed against a cost to Williams of $3,211.42 for promoting and holding the concert, a sign for several of her invested friends that the Foundation effort was a wash and should not proceed further. Williams intended to record a live album of the Carnegie Hall concert, with all proceeds benefiting her Foundation. At her request, Bliss contacted the American Federation of Musicians for permission to record the volunteer musicians. However, Bliss received the response that “unless the performing musicians are paid recording wage scales,” the union could not grant recording permission. The unintended consequence of the musicians’ charitable
gesture, in foregoing payment for the concert, was that the profession’s established labor
practices prevented a potentially lucrative source of revenue and avenue for broader publicity for
Williams’s Foundation.

Nevertheless, Williams continued to navigate America’s charitable landscape through
publicity and fundraising letters. Some of the larger initial donations to her Foundation
represented group ticket purchases of seats in Carnegie Hall for the concert, like the request from
the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP) for their $100.00 gift to
secure “a first tier box of eight seats.” And in lieu of immediate financial support, noteworthy
colleagues in the profession provided their names as currency for Williams to use in promoting
her mission and as a public testament to their trust in her vision. In lieu of his appearance due to
another engagement, Sammy Davis, Jr. granted permission for his name to appear as a sponsor
on Williams’s official Bel Canto Foundation stationery. But not all respondents to Williams’s
fundraising appeals readily granted her requests. One respondent named Howard Sanders
expressed that some quid pro quo form of entertainment would serve as a welcome enticement to
accompany her charitable effort: “Dear Miss Williams, Your long experience with the public
means that you do not send out such request without suggesting a complimentary ticket. Truly

Jazz Studies, Series 4: Business Correspondence, Subseries 4L: Legal Affairs, 1941-1980, undated; Box 41, Folder 2
(Bliss, Herbert J., 1958).
55 “Bell Telephone Company – ‘Loot to Boot’ Paid Out,” Mary Lou Williams Collection, Institute of Jazz Studies,
Series 4: Business Papers, Subseries 4L: Bel Canto, ca. 1950-1971, 1977, undated; Box 47, Folder 6 (Benefit Activities
[Concert, Rummage Sale, etc.]). Williams wrote checks for advertisements in the New York Times, the New York
Amsterdam News, and for poster and banner advertisements. The Carnegie Hall booking cost $1,740.38, while other
miscellaneous costs like parking tickets, supplies, and car rental added to her total. Additionally, Williams’s bank
statement lists the total cost as $3,210.42, $1 less than the accurate total.
56 “Letter to Mary Lou Williams from George A. Hoffman, American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers,
September 12, 1958,” Mary Lou Williams Collection, Institute of Jazz Studies, Series 4: Business Papers, Subseries
4L: Bel Canto, ca. 1950-1971, 1977, undated; Box 47, Folder 6 (Benefit Activities [Concert, Rummage Sale, etc.]).
57 “Letter to Mary Lou Williams from Sammy Davis, Jr., April 28, 1958,” Mary Lou Williams Collection, Institute
of Jazz Studies, Series 4: Business Papers, Subseries 4L: Bel Canto, ca. 1950-1971, 1977, undated; Box 47, Folder 6
(Benefit Activities [Concert, Rummage Sale, etc.]).
yours, Howard Sanders.” Sanders represented a minority sentiment about the Carnegie Hall concert as a fundraising vehicle, and the publicity Williams gained for the Foundation effort confirmed for her the vision she had to support others. Immediate friends, professional colleagues, and musical networks were willing to part with varying amounts of income, persuaded by these initial steps to reframe their conception of professional and personal accountability around Williams’s prospective institutionalization of care.

Williams continued to send fundraising letters over the next few years as she devised new efforts to foster a sense of accountability between musicians and audiences. She organized rummage sales, offering “New Items from Saks Fifth Ave” including “children’s clothes, shoes, dresses, books, house ware, dishes, antiques, men’s clothes, original paintings, [and] lamps.” She advertised the location of her rummage sales at 310 and 318 East 29th street in New York City, with weekly operational hours from “10[a.m.-till.” Advertisements for the rummage sales were hand-drawn leaflets, reproduced through mimeograph, and Williams likely distributed them throughout her neighborhood (see figure 6.3 and figure 6.4). Despite the Carnegie concert’s publicity, Williams was perhaps the only person truly convinced of her ability to establish the Foundation. But the rummage sales served as a charitable concept that Williams maintained into the following decade. Successful persons, musicians and otherwise, enjoyed an excess of material goods with which they could easily part. And even though all of these items were perishable in the long run, wealthier individuals had the means to buy sturdier, more

58 “Undated letter from Howard Sanders to Mary Lou Williams,” Mary Lou Williams Collection, Institute of Jazz Studies, Series 4: Business Papers, Subseries 4L: Bel Canto, ca. 1950-1971, 1977, undated; Box 47, Folder 6 (Benefit Activities [Concert, Rummage Sale, etc.]). Williams wrote at the bottom of this letter, “Mr. Sanders, This is zero hour. Please help me on the hour every hour to make this concert a success. Very truly yours, Mary Lou Williams.” However, it does not appear that she mailed this reply to him.
59 “Rummage Sale – at 318 East 29 St” and “Rummage Sale! 310 East 29th Street,” Mary Lou Williams Collection, Institute of Jazz Studies, Series 4: Business Papers, Subseries 4L: Bel Canto, ca. 1950-1971, 1977, undated; Box 47, Folder 6 (Benefit Activities [Concert, Rummage Sale, etc.]).
durable goods that would be of great use, even through second-hand ownership. Williams and her successful friends donated their own luxury clothes, household items, and antiques in the ongoing effort to raise money for the Bel Canto Foundation. The rummage sale fostered the (re)circulation of material goods, within a local community, between two financially disparate socioeconomic classes, and for cheaper than original costs. This stood as an alternative to the conventional circulation of economic resources between these two classes, such as money dispensed through an hourly wage employment system. For her ultimate goal of benefiting jazz musicians on the social margins, Williams came to rely on a charitable commercial practice that linked the most marginalized of New York City’s working class with its successful elites whose friendship, favor, and admiration she had earned over several years.
In 1959, Williams chose 308 East 29th street as the location of a thrift shop to continue her practice of selling donated goods from musicians, socialites, and others, to fundraise for her Foundation. In the long effort to realize her dream to support for musicians by holding others accountable for their care, Williams encountered the reality that in American society, the institutionalization of care required its own measures of accountability with which Williams had to become familiar. There were three related aspects of Williams’s accountability: her personal bookkeeping, the maintenance of federal and state licenses to operate as a tax-free charity in the city, and establishing and maintaining her professional trustworthiness to (re)negotiate contracts.
and terms with her creditors. Official legal forms, bureaucratic liaisons, and constant personal correspondences served as the modes to institutionalize trust and credibility through accountability and transparency (see figure 6.5). To maintain her thrift shop in its more unprofitable moments, Williams also became responsible for drafting requests to revise payment terms and explaining insufficient funds for overdue bills, justifying her store’s viability in order to renew licenses. Additionally, she was responsible for the diligent accounting of daily expenses alongside continued appeals for funds and advertisements.

Initially operating in her Hamilton Terrace apartment in New York City, Williams recruited others to assist at various stages of establishing the shop. To secure a location, Williams enlisted Irene Phillips as the chairman of the “Bel Canto Foundation Rummage Sale.” Writing to “Mr. Weinberg,” a potential landlord with property on East 29th Street, Phillips crafted a persuasive framing of Williams’s mission by restating it in more conventional charitable terms: “The Bel Canto Foundation is an organization to raise funds for a Rest Home and/or Convalescent Home for Professional Musicians.” Phillips then had to “sell” the idea of the shop as a viable venture, based on the current inventory of celebrity donations: “We have donations of clothes from many many professional musicians and to mention a few: Mr. Louis Armstrong, Mr. Dizzy Gillespie, Count Basie, Lena Horne, Nat King Cole, and many others too numerous to mention.” The prospective viability of the thrift shop was to serve as evidence to secure a physical location for its operation, given that the Foundation did not have immediate financial resources to acquire a store: “We are a new organization with no funds on hand but in need of a place to raise funds for this worthy cause. We are a duly authorized licensed charitable organization by the State of New York and our Lawyer (handling our affairs gratis until we get under way) is Mr. Herbert Bliss, 250 Park Avenue, N.Y.C. Telephone YU-6-7420.” Lastly,
Phillips requested to eliminate the immediate rental costs, assuring timely payments in the future:

“We would appreciate it very very much if you or your organization would see fit to grant us 2 months rent gratis with the understanding that we would pay rent from there on.” She also assured Weinberg that the maintenance of the rental space was to occur at the Foundation’s expense.60

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For Williams, the fact that Bliss rendered his services pro bono was to serve as a testament of one legal professional’s trust in her overall efforts. Additionally, Bliss crafted letters that rendered Williams’s period of religious exploration intelligible (and palatable) to others outside of her personal relations. Writing to the Internal Revenue Service in 1960, Bliss conveyed a condensed sense of the time between Williams’s initial pursuit of God and the realization of her new mission, while also muting the sense of fervor others perceived Williams to have: “…Mary Lou strove to find the peace within herself that jazz had not given her. She gave up music entirely...not touching a piano, composing a note or even listening to records. She became a devout Roman Catholic, spending many hours in prayer and meditation. And she translated her faith into action by helping dozens of down and out musicians get back on their feet. Thus did she find the serenity she was seeking.”61 This narrative presentation erased the more socially problematic aspects of her street evangelism, muted the intense asceticism of her prayer practices, overlooked the possibility of theological complexity in her embrace of Roman Catholicism (of the sort that she expressed in personal letters and correspondences and through statements about divinely-gifted African Americans), and concealed the actual nature of her care for intoxicated musicians wrestling with mental instability in her apartment. Ultimately, this representation of Williams’s religious journey reflected Bliss’s effort to secure, through federal recognition of her social service project, the government’s legal blessing of Williams’s pursuit. With this condensed narrative portrait, Bliss conveyed this critical period of her life factually, without calling attention to decisions or habits that might cause others in his legal world to question her judgment.

On Williams’s personal part, her detailed expense books recorded the donations, sales, and personal finances she put into the thrift shop. Regular expenses in 1959 and 1960 included travel (train cost, cab and bus fare, tolls, parking tickets), transportation of materials (shipping, car rental), meals (for herself, relatives, and others), repairs (for the shop, the shop’s car), shop maintenance (hardware, personal care products, cleaning supplies, office furniture and supplies), care for donated clothes (hangers, dry-cleaning), publicity (stamps, paint, posters, cardboard, printing), the shop’s bills (telephone and gas), rental payments for the shop, and Williams’s personal loans to the shop, for which she also recorded the shop’s repayments to her. However, these expense books were essential for holding her accountable about her own daily expenses, serving at times to check the degree to which her time and resources went toward personal errands and spending. Williams consistently recorded payments for her sister, Grace Mickles (who struggled with alcoholism), and for Grace’s children. Other expenses included her performance trips to other cities, the one-time services of an accountant, and the annual cost of a post office box. Total receipts for the shop, from September 1 through December 31, 1960 amounted to $1,035.32. Against $357.38 in expenses for that quarter, the total gain amounted to $677.94.

Williams maintained inventory records for thrift shop donations. She informed potential donors that item prices would be low, given that “the territory in which the store is located is a poor one” and potential shop patrons “are on home relief with limited funds and therefore not

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able to pay too much." The inventory book covering December 1959 through September 1960 lists the source (using donor initials) and costs of items: dresses, gowns, shirts, coats, skirts, scarves, girdles, hats, ties, shoes, slippers, pajamas, children’s clothes, radios, irons and ironing boards, watches, vases, purses, cigarette holders, lampshades, books, photo albums, glassware, dishes, curtains, vinyl albums, a microscope, a periscope, and a Bible. Williams listed no entries for July through September 8, 1960, since she had no permit during that period to sell merchandise from her shop. Williams kept track of the jazz musicians and composers who made donations to her Foundation in 1960, including the pianist Billy Taylor, trumpeter Lee Morgan, drummer Art Blakey, alto saxophonist Lou Donaldson, and pianist Lou Levy (see figure 6.6). Williams even experimented with issuing Bel Canto membership cards, attendant with $5 membership fees.

Naturally, accounting was central to participating in any institutionalized system of accountability. For the year ending May 31, 1960, Williams filed the New York State Department of Social Welfare’s Annual Report for Charitable Organizations, declaring an income of $3,260.63 ($727.30 from the rummage sale and $2,533.33 in donations) and $1,952.50 in expenses ($973.74 for the rummage sale, and $978.76, possibly related to fundraising donations), for a total net income of $1,308.13 (although because of a miscalculation, she

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reported $100 less than the actual total). Williams filed a financial report on February 15, 1961, a required submission to New York’s Department of Welfare, Division of Public Solicitation. She declared $3,322.19 in receipts ($1,531.77 from the thrift shop sales and $1,790.42 in donor contributions) and $1,599.64 in total expenses, for a net income of $1,722.55 (although Williams again calculated the total as $10 less than the actual amount). On the form’s reverse page, she indicated that the Foundation’s bank account contained $1,806.20 for the purpose of “helping needy and deserving musicians.” She also needed to explain two other expenses she titled “Loan repaid to M. L. Williams” and “Aid $62.38” in writing on the reverse page:

Aid: Check in the amount of 47.38 was given to Diane Coles to pay back room rent and to rehabilitate herself.

Aid: George Gordon, Musician, had heart attack on job. Took care of him by letting him watch thrift shop. Gave George Gordon 1 check for $10.00 and 1 for $5.00.

$100.00 of $165.00 loan made to fund by Mary Lou Williams.  

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With this financial form and others, there were obvious descriptive limitations on what Williams could classify as “care” for particular musicians, given her professional traveling schedule and other financial obligations in addition to managing the shop. Fifteen dollars for George Gordon may not have been enough to cover his health care costs, but perhaps the relatively insubstantial amount obscures the degree of William’s actual involvement when she “took care of him” in her shop—constant communication with Gordon over his period of recuperation, errands she may have run for him, recruiting others to check in on his progress, preparing meals for him, and even regular conversations with him about life, music, and future goals beyond his immediate illness. The checks may have even represented the official amount that she provided Gordon once he was well enough to leave the shop, concealing Williams’s true investment of time and finances to ensure his recovery. Such matters of personal care are not as easy to quantify on federal forms, particularly when time was constantly a precious and limited resource for the busy Williams. Additionally, the George Gordon Singers performed for one of Williams’s albums of religious jazz in 1964, evidence that her relationship with this musician extended well beyond what one individual form was able to capture.

**Contrasting Visions of Charity**

Williams closed her thrift shop location on East 29th street in 1963, after not having operated it for eight months (but continue to make its rental payments). Performing and recording commitments made it increasingly difficult for her to oversee the shop’s daily functions. Additionally, she declared that the store operated at a loss and “the Bel Canto Foundation is indebted to me for several thousand dollars.”69 She determined that her

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69 “Letter from Mary Lou Williams to the City of New York, Department of Finance, Division of Special Taxes, September 17, 1963,” Mary Lou Williams Collection, Institute of Jazz Studies, Series 4: Business Papers, Subseries
Foundation required restructuring, and she settled on a new location at 1667 Amsterdam Avenue.

At the request of Joseph Wells, owner of New York City’s Wells Restaurant and an acquaintance of Williams, Waldo E. Parrish (1933-2014) contacted Williams on September 27, 1963 to assist her in acquiring a tax-exempt status for the Bel Canto Foundation. Parrish, executive director of the Adam Clayton Powell Foundation, Inc. since its inception two years earlier, sought to recast the Bel Canto Foundation’s mission statement in order to provide the tax exemptions that Williams’s celebrity friends like the jazz vocalist and actress Pearl Bailey requested, given that her donations to other thrift shops were deductible. Parrish offered Williams his experience as “Director of one of the, only four or five, Negro Foundations in the United States” in the effort to make her Foundation viable. By November 13, Parrish had met with Herbert Bliss in order to determine “the feasibility of instituting specific programs and projects that might ‘IMMEDIATELY’ fit within the scope of the Bel Canto Foundation, Inc., Charter.” To achieve tax-exempt status was to ensure a larger and reliable donor base for the Foundation, given that supporters’ funds would become tax-deductible. One recommendation was to alter the Foundation charter with a provision “to help—by befriending, assisting, and counseling—‘WAYWARD YOUTH’ (whose age category has not yet been determined).”


71 Waldo Parrish was previously Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.’s “Personal & Confidential Secretary” and had served as the “Administrative Assistant” of “Congressional Committee when he became Chairman of the Committee on Education and Labor of the United States Congress.” “Letter from Waldo E. Parrish to Mary Lou Williams, September 27, 1963,” Mary Lou Williams Collection, Institute of Jazz Studies, Series 4: Business Papers, Subseries 4L: Bel Canto, ca. 1950-1971, 1977, undated, Box 47, Folder 1 (Adam Clayton Powell Foundation Correspondence, Various locations, 1959-1964).

In a second correspondence with Williams, Parrish evaluated the goals of Williams’s mission as she rearticulated them, revealing the linguistic translation of her ministerial desires into terms legible to the federal government. He assessed that the Foundation’s Carnegie Hall concert incurred a financial deficit and that the Rummage Sale, from his “personal evaluation, was not a financial success—in terms of the potential that it carried” with Williams’s celebrity attached to it. Parrish evaluated the Foundation’s I.R.S. application for tax exemption, noting its failure to define clearly the envisioned resources for helping “narcotic addicts” that fit this type of “Social Service Project.” From his conversation with Williams, he understood four particular facets for these musicians’ recuperation:

a) Methods of withdrawal and speculation—your indicated private housing facilities, home in the suburbs or country, etc.
b) Outlets for the creativeness of the musicians in their arts; the availability of music rooms, instruments, instruction and supervision, etc.
c) Strengthening the moral fiber of these individuals through religion and spiritual guidance, and the association of your friend, The Reverend Ward I believe, with your program.
d) The resurrection of their desire to again become a meaningful and respected part of our community in particular, and of society in general—through the jazz medias, if this is what you so desire.73

Parrish offered to Williams the use of the word “REHABILITATION”—instead of treatment—to ensure federal approval of her next application: “Your next application must include soundly structured projects in the areas of vocational rehabilitation in the musical field for these individuals. These projects must be professionally designed constructive seminar-workshops, administered by psychiatrists, clinicians, medical personnel (both doctors, nurses, and clerks) social workers and social leaders in the community, clergymen, and the professional public.” Parrish indicated that providing such a professional staff would not occur at a substantial cost to

73 “Confidential Memorandum from Waldo E. Parrish to Mary Lou Williams, November 13, 1963,” p. 2-3.
the Foundation, because Parrish would secure these professional services by recruiting persons already connected to the arts community as volunteers (thereby relying on, expanding, and calling to accountability the very type of musical community that Williams imagined). Parrish then offered his assistance on crafting a new, “formal” application, in addition to contacting the relevant “Social Welfare Foundations,” religious organizations, and sources for federal, city, and state funding. For Williams’s other goal to assist “wayward children,” Parrish offered his own “project which will fit into the areas of counseling, vocational training and youth employment—all which can be funded.”

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It is unclear why Williams decided against Parrish’s practical experience and advice. By February of 1964, Parrish had spoken with Williams on several occasions at length and reported to Herbert Bliss that “she may not be aware of all the ramifications involved in the operation procedures of her Foundation.” By this point, Williams had committed to producing an album, following the advice of her friends, the Jesuit Father Anthony Woods and Dizzy Gillespie. *Mary Lou Williams Presents Black Christ of the Andes*, released on her label, Mary Records, was a collection of original compositions (and some jazz standards) celebrating the seventeenth century Afro-Peruvian Catholic Saint Martin de Porres. The album’s liner notes framed Williams’s return to music as the implementation of her talents for the purpose of helping others:

Finally, several years after she had joined the Catholic Church, her teacher, the Jesuit Father Anthony Woods, persuaded her to go back to music. For one thing, the Bel Canto Foundation she had started to rehabilitate sick musicians needed funds. But Father Woods was aware of something else. He told her, “Mary, you’re an artist. You belong at the piano and writing music. It’s my business to help people through the Church and your business to help people through music. Part of the proceeds from this album will be turned over to the Bel Canto Foundation. After more than a decade, Mary Lou Williams’ music is heard again—a beautifully authoritative, truly moving experience.

74 “Confidential Memorandum from Waldo E. Parrish to Mary Lou Williams, November 13, 1963,” p. 3-4.
Additional liner notes by drummer Gérard Pochonet indicated that 10% of the album’s proceeds “will be used for the rehabilitation of musicians.” According to Williams’s friend and eventual manager, Father Peter O’Brien, Eustis Guillemet was one of the African American jazz artists she supported financially at the time. Described in *Black Christ of the Andes*’ liner notes as “an up and coming bass-man,” Guillemet was the inspiration for Williams’s composition “Dirge Blues.”

According to Williams’s 1965 income tax files, he received at least $172.76 from her.

Parrish, however, deemed this method laudable but financially unfeasible. More importantly, Parrish considered this reoriented revenue source a strong deviation “from the intent of the Certificate of Incorporation” that would make it more difficult for the government to approve the Foundation’s tax exempt status. Parrish reiterated his suggestions for restructuring the application that he outlined in November, and he stressed that offering the services to youth and adults “will allow for dual-funding under the same programs.” He identified immediate federal government projects that could yield funding sources for Williams’s Foundation:

*[The Federal Government, in conjunction with State and City Governments, are now sponsoring Demonstration and Research Projects dealing with prevention of narcotic addiction, juvenile delinquency and youth crime. These projects make available to Miss Williams avenues of financing from varied sources, e.g., The Vocational Rehabilitation Training Act and Manpower Training Act, plus other legislation under government auspices. In addition, professional research will produce more than 4500 “priority” Foundations throughout the United States which concentrate their grant allocations in the fields of: Social Welfare,]*

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76 On another page of Williams’s income tax accounting, Guillemet received another $18 in cash donations, and he may have also received an additional $60 in cash that year (although the way she recorded this amount makes it unclear). Mary Lou Williams Collection, Institute of Jazz Studies, Series 4: Business Papers; Box 62, Folder “Taxes-Federal Income Taxes, 1965”, p. 1-3.
Juvenile Delinquency Prevention Research, Education, the Humanities, and Health—all of the aforementioned areas can be related to the fields of narcotics and drug abuse and alcoholism—the primary areas of concern of the Bel Canto Foundation, Inc.\(^\text{77}\)

In the remainder of his letter, Parrish expressed a fine line between asserting his credibility as a consultant in designing projects close to Bel Canto’s ideal mission and insisting that Bliss and Williams essentially appoint him manager of the Foundation’s future projects. For instance, he indicated awareness of a recent “President’s Advisory Committee Report” on Narcotic and Drug Abuse and a recent *Journal American* newspaper series on narcotics. He stated that he was “the first individual in this nation to design projects, in another area, that are being considered by the government for funding and encompass the narcotic crisis…. This is why now is the opportune time for Miss Williams to make a positive move if she really desires to accomplish her Foundation’s purposes.” Parrish reminded Bliss that he was a “Professional Consultant” whose fee for a memorandum of this length was normally $100.\(^\text{78}\)

Was there an issue of mistrust between Parrish and Bliss, or between Williams and Parrish? Did Williams ultimately have a fear of the Powell Foundation’s co-optation or absorption of hers? At the end of his memorandum, Parrish attempted to assure Bliss that a strong commitment to Williams and the Foundation’s aims drove his assertiveness:

> I am well aware of the limited resources of Miss Williams’ Foundation. But my interest and personal regard for Miss Williams’ dedication and sincerity since I have met her has overwhelmingly impressed me, because I have met no other member of my race so devoted to helping others, by this method. However, that may be because I am very young as regards my acquaintances in this field. At


any rate, I will do whatever I can to help her by lending the benefit of my knowledge and thinking, and my experience—because her Foundation has great potential for mass projection and acceptance if properly managed.\(^\text{79}\)

Parrish’s relative youth, assertiveness, and an expression of bureaucratic meticulousness may have dissuaded rather than convinced Williams that he was suited to assist her Foundation, despite these two black professionals’ shared concern for the plight of fellow struggling African Americans. Perhaps Williams, the established musician with her convictions about the scope of her mission, had committed to controlling her Foundation and its path toward institutional recognition and stability. If music was her gift, then her music would prove a solution to aiding jazz artists in need.

In a March letter to Bliss, Parrish reiterated his concern to support Williams’s Foundation, reasoning again that she did not comprehend “all of the technicalities and ramifications involved in obtaining a Federal tax exemption,” since “Miss Williams is an artist and not a Foundation executive.” Williams was one of the recipients of a carbon copy of this letter, and she may have perceived Parrish’s insistence as patronizing. Parrish continued,

“I personally feel that Miss Williams, though very astute, could not possibly be qualified to discuss the technical and legal areas of the operation of her Foundation with me alone and understand all that is encompassed therein. I feel certain she will understand this and accept it as realistic. This is why I have continually advised her to have you, who would be the logical person to discuss the program with since you have been active with the Foundation from its inception, or any other person represent her that she feels qualified to comprehend the legal aspects and concept of this project.”\(^\text{80}\)

Williams and Bliss ultimately agreed to meet with Parrish to discuss his proposals further, and Bliss requested that Henry R. Williams, lawyer to Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., review Parrish’s suggested changes to the Foundation’s Certificate of Incorporation. Communication between Bliss and Henry Williams indicates that Mary Lou Williams considered the suggested changes an unacceptable alteration to her Foundation’s principle concern for aiding musicians. Bliss continued to communicate with Parrish as late as August of 1964. It is not clear how far their conversations went before Williams pursued alternative strategies to support the Foundation. If Williams narrowed her professional resources for institutional support following this series of memorandum exchanges and in-person meetings, the well-intentioned condescension of youth (relative to her age at this point) and the prospect of masculine legal professionalism (white and black) deciding the direction of the Foundation in her stead may have been undesirable. This demonstrated lack of trust in Williams’s facility with institutional matters neglected recognition of her work to establish Mary Records, a “grassroots label” to sell her music, and Cecilia Publishing Company, which secured royalties from artists who performed her many compositions. It was important for Parrish to establish professional credibility and personal trust with Williams, but a palpable absence of deference to her decisions may not have endeared

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81 Bliss submitted a copy of the Certificate of Incorporation to Henry R. Williams, stating that while he should make all necessary changes, “Mary Lou is primarily interested in musicians and wants this to continue as the main purpose. Changes to be acceptable to her must not alter this primary purpose.” Bliss continued, “Mary Lou objects to the use of her name. I sincerely believe that there is more to it than people asking her for money….Mary Lou is not too encouraged. She has dreamed of this terrific idea for so long, I am convinced she believes it will never get out of fantasy land.” “Letter from Herbert J. Bliss to Waldo E. Parrish, March 31, 1964,” and “Letter from Herbert J. Bliss to Henry R. Williams, April 22, 1964,” Mary Lou Williams Collection, Institute of Jazz Studies, Series 4: Business Papers, Subseries 4I: Legal Affairs, 1941-1980, undated; Box 41, Folder 2 (Bliss, Herbert J., 1962-1971).

82 After Herbert Bliss responded to Waldo Parrish on March 31, 1964 to schedule a meeting, Williams wrote Parrish a letter stating the list of names for the Bel Canto Foundation board, which included jazz pianist Billy Taylor, Father Woods, Bliss, and others. Mary Lou Williams Collection, Institute of Jazz Studies, Series 4: Business Papers, Subseries 4L: Bel Canto, ca. 1950-1971, 1977, undated; Box 47, Folder 1 (Adam Clayton Powell Foundation Correspondence, Various locations, 1959-1964). Since this correspondence archive ends in 1964, it is likely the case that the relationship between the Bel Canto Foundation and the Adam Clayton Powell Foundation ceased at this point.

83 Kernodle, 246.
him to her. Williams already had fellow musicians, close friends, business and legal advisors, and Catholic compatriots whom she trusted and who trusted her. This trust and accountability took years to establish. And given that Williams’ best friend, Hazel Scott, was the former wife of Reverend/Congressman Powell, there simply could have existed a personal distaste for any personal or institutional cooperation with him or his associates. Perhaps the hurried assurance of a young professional consultant, eager to restructure her long-held vision, lacked the personal work of assuring Williams that he was the right person to navigate her through hazardous legal bramble.

Forging Relationships of Accountability

Several incarcerated men wrote to Williams seeking her support upon their impending release from prison. In a May 1964 *New Yorker* profile, Williams discussed the contents of one such letter that she received: “[The inmate] says he’s about to get out, and wants to know if I can help him get a job. He saw a piece in *The Christian Science Monitor* about Bel Canto. I’ll write him and tell him to pray and call me when he gets here. I receive letters like this all the time.”

Although it is unclear that she hired from among these gentlemen, Williams included in her Foundation files the applications of several inmates for employment at the Bel Canto Thrift Shop in 1965 and 1966 at its 1667 Amsterdam Avenue location. On the application forms, supplied by institutions like Green Haven prison in Stormville, New York, and Auburn Prison in Auburn, New York, the warden’s form letter requested that the potential employer indicate an interest in the applicant for the purposes of the inmate’s appearance before the Board of Parole (see figure

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84 “Profiles: Out Here Again,” p. 82. Williams referred to the December 1963 *Christian Science Monitor* article which briefly described, in part, her support for musicians: “Eventual goal of the foundation is a rehabilitation home for musicians in need of care. Presently the foundation provides short-term financial aid to musicians until they can find work. And work, in Miss Williams’s vocabulary, means washing dishes as well as blowing trumpet.” See Amy Lee, “Jazz Philanthropist Calls Up Heritage,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, Dec 31, 1963, 2.
6.7 and figure 6.8). For these men, each of them a high school graduate in his late twenties, employment prospects counted as one of several requirements for release. Williams, the potential employer, had the opportunity to complete the “Employer’s Inquiry” form. As the application stated, “Filling in and returning the Employer’s Inquiry does not obligate you; it merely signifies your willingness to give his application further consideration. Therefore, if you wish to fill in and return the Employer’s Inquiry, a parole officer in your community will call on you to supply such detailed information as you may wish, and you can reach your final decision as to whether you wish to offer employment.” Williams was able to signal to the Board of Parole that, based on each man’s application letter, he was well suited to “make a fresh start as a useful member of society.”

In a relatively impersonal way, this system allowed strangers to testify on the behalf of strangers to secure their release from prison—to trust a person’s testimony of rehabilitation, to forgive as a proxy for the broader society whose laws the men transgressed, and to guide the person’s re-entry into the moral relationships of a free society (codified through its laws) in the role of employer. If they men ended up in Williams’ employ following release, they now entered a relationship with her where they were morally accountable to her business and her mission.

The employment application letter by Jerry Hemphill attests to this transitory network of accountability that carceral officials of the state, potential parolees, and prospective employers worked to establish and maintain:

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To: M. L. Williams, Manager:

Greetings:

I have been certified as parole-able on or about October 7th, 1965. If I have obtained my own program which has been approved. This would consist of a job and a residence.

This letter is requesting a job in your shop or one obtained by your shop in my behalf.

I am reasonably intelligent, and instead of quoting an imposing list of abilities, I’ll say this: I will be glad for any type of employment from clerical to manual labor.
My gratitude will be the biggest guarantee of all against my goofing, not
to mention my respect for you and your achievements, and last, (and perhaps most
important) the fact that someone of my people helped me would add fierce
determination to bring no regrets, but instead, make you glad you aided.
I am also a lyricist, and I intend to lyricize “lonely moments” and things
like that.
I will receive any reply that is upon official stationary, and as I deem it
sensible to take residence in the same borough that I will work in, a prompt reply
would be grand—in fact any reply would be grand.
Thanking you in advance for any consideration which you may extend to
me. I shall remain

Respectfully Yours,
Jerry Hemphill #8391

86 “Employment Application Letter from Jerry Hemphill to Mary Lou Williams, September 10, 1965,” Mary Lou
Williams Collection, Institute of Jazz Studies, Series 4: Business Papers, Subseries 4L: Bel Canto, ca. 1950-1971,
Hemphill’s letter expressed an appreciation of Williams’s professional accomplishments, recognition of their shared identity as African Americans, and the promise that her good will inspired him to move beyond his past mistakes. If hired, Hemphill owed Williams his relative personal success and social propriety, as a young black man starting life anew. His professed lyrical talents must have also resonated with Williams, given her established desire to aid disaffected musicians. It is also possible that Hemphill listened to Williams’s music while incarcerated. Williams had established personal relationships with several Catholic prison chaplains in the 1960s, men who expressed admiration for her music and her charitable mission. Consequently, someone like Hemphill may have become aware of her work through conversations with religious authority figures in the prison system.87

If successful, both as parolees and as applicants, employment at the Bel Canto Thrift Shop placed these men into a community of accountability; rather than entry into “normal” society, however, their particular community encompassed the commercial transmission of (black) upper class goods to a (black) working class clientele, the constant reminders of the racially inequitable punitive world of incarceration, and the financial instability of charitable subsistence-wage job opportunities. It is also likely that Williams required their employ as one of her strategies to maintain a tax-exempt status, so in her efforts to publicize her mission and to promote the thrift shop, she maintained accountability to an institutional system alongside the added responsibility of maintaining enough revenue to pay her employees’ wages.

If the names of Hemphill and applicants did not appear on official Bel Canto employment paperwork, the likely case is that if hired, they received direct cash payments or they were the recipients of Williams’s check made out to “cash.” In the 1960s, several musicians appeared in Williams’s checkbooks as the recipients of payments for performances (in addition to personal loans): bassist George Tucker (1927-1965), who performed for her trio along with drummer Andrew Cyrille (b. 1939); drummer Berisford “Shep” Shepherd (b. 1917); drummer, arranger, and singer James “Osie” Johnson (1923-1966); double bassist and photographer Milton John “Milt” Hinton (1910-2000); and drummer Percy Brice (b. 1923). These musicians likely had stable enough employment to maintain bank accounts, whereas the thrift shop employees and struggling musicians Williams encountered most likely received “out-of-pocket” compensation or charity, respectively. In her 1965 income tax files, Williams indicated a total of $227.76 in personal payments to several African American musicians: bassist Eustis Guillemet, drummer Granville William “Mickey” Roker (b. 1932), bassist Melbourne R. “Bob” Cranshaw (b. 1932), and a donation to pianist and composer Tadley Ewing Peake “Tadd” Dameron (1917-1965). It is plausible that Williams enlisted these musicians, and others, as her sidemen for various concert performances in order to afford them steady income and to allow them to continue exercising their musical gifts. But Williams also maintained lasting correspondences with some musicians, who shared with her their progress in (and frustrations with) the music industry, the details of their daily prayer habits, and their reflections on social unrest.

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88 Andrew Cyrille later became an avant-garde drummer for jazz pianist Cecil Taylor, a musician whose style represented a comical foe for Mary Lou Williams in her normative articulation of jazz as music.
89 Checkbooks and Balance Registers, 1962-1964, Mary Lou Williams Collection, Institute of Jazz Studies, Series 4: Business Papers, Subseries 4M: Banking; Box 50.
91 Between 1965 and 1966, Eustis Guillemet updated Williams on his decision to leave New York City, in addition to his occasional requests for financial support for music equipment and rent. While staying at a YMCA in Atlantic
Others brought musicians in need of support to Williams’s attention. On December 2, 1964, the New York attorney Bernard Stollman petitioned Williams for help “on behalf of the distressed.” Stollman wanted the Foundation to assist Chris Anderson (1926-2008), a “blind, crippled Negro pianist and composer, whose artistry and courage have won him strong support from fellow musicians and from those fortunate enough to have heard him perform.”

Anderson, who was a mentor to jazz pianist Herbie Hancock (b. 1940), was not seeking to lean entirely on Bel Canto to support him in any recuperation. He sought membership in the American Federation of Musicians, Local 802, which required an initiation fee of $130 and quarterly dues of $7.50. On December 3, Williams signed and delivered a check for Chris Anderson in the amount of $50, with the accompanying “Notice of Grant” stipulating that $21

City, NJ, Guillemet informed Williams of the changing social climate: “…[T]here might be more marches and sit ins this summer. The whites live on one side[,] the colored on the other. Most of the youngsters are participating in either marches or sit ins. So say some extra prayers that God will show His justice and graces in bettering conditions of both people if it be His Holy Will and salvation of the Souls involved.” On his regular Catholic practices, Guillemet conveyed to Williams his dedication in moments of personal frustration: “Good talking to you and very good reading from ya. I was upright at the time and at a very low point. Not that I didn’t know what to do, I just couldn’t get together but I did as I talked to a priest and he told [me] that sometimes God permits stress and strain to show us how weak we are and upon asking His Graces, He lets us know that we are still dependent on Him….One day I got a good look at the people I’ve been around and it frightened me. I hope I wasn’t looking at myself. If I was I have a long way to go and a lot of work to do. Anyway I went to New York and sat with the Blessed Sacrament and a day later I got myself together. I guess I was away too long. The Sacrament isn’t exposed too often here and there aren’t too many Catholics, active that is. But like you said[,] pray and keep your mind on the music. That I will do with all determination because every time I look the other way I start getting in trouble.” See “Letter from Eustis Guillemet to Mary Lou Williams, February 5, 1965,” “Letter from Eustis Guillemet to Mary Lou Williams, May 30, 1966,” and “Letter from Eustis Guillemet to Mary Lou Williams, June 22, 1966,” Mary Lou Williams Collection, Institute of Jazz Studies, Series 3: Personal Correspondence, Subseries 3B: Correspondence with Friends, ca. 1925-1952, 1958-1981; Box 8, Folder 11 (Eustis Guillemet, 1965-1973, undated).


was to cover food costs and $29 was for his rent. On December 8, Irene Phillips sent a letter to Williams to provide an update on Anderson’s situation, indicating that the Foundation had paid his union dues:

Christopher Anderson was in today and everything is in order[.] He is at this very moment down in the dues department getting his membership card. I told him that the check was for the full amount of Initiation and one quarter’s dues and that beginning January he will be able to keep up his dues with the small payment of $7.50. The dues department just called me and stated that they issued the card to him.

He told me that he was looking for an apartment as he has to get out of the Hotel and gave his address in care of a friend in business (temporarily) living on Warren St., Brooklyn. The name of the friend is Bill Lee.

You know, Mary, you are such a DEAR. You have done so many GOOD DEEDS! MAY GOD BLESS YOU!

I just have to make it my business to see YOU! With my love, Irene

Aside from directly contacting the Thrift Shop, a musician had to forge professional and personal relationships with others who could seek charity on his behalf. Face-to-face requests, phone calls, or written letters represented the methods of interpersonal communication to place oneself in such a charitable network, and having legal advocates make a musician’s case for aid ensured that Williams’s assistance went to persons with verified need. The nature of financial assistance
could depend on the phrasing and reasoning of the request in addition to the requested amount, and Williams may have determined the degree of future financial support she provided musicians by the amount of her responses to their initial requests. Having Irene Phillips as a liaison who ensured that Anderson’s financial support made it to the intended recipients—and having her report this outcome and any further developments or requests to Williams—reveals that the enactment of singular charitable gestures required diligent recordkeeping that testified to professional accountability. And on the part of “the distressed,” entrance into musical worlds of charity inevitably required accountability, partially through others testifying to their true need.

Williams’s personal grants and payments to male musicians raise the question of whether the Bel Canto mission was a ministry for jazz men. Her donations suggest an inevitable focus on black men (given the male-leaning gender balance of the jazz profession), even though black women in her family were recipients of her charity. According to a 1965 “Notice of Grant” form, Ada Moore (1926-1991), a Chicago-born singer and Broadway actress, was the recipient of a Foundation grant in the amount of $38 ($35 to cover rent, $2 “cash”, and $1 for dinner) on November 8, 1965. This form required the “Signature of applicant” in addition to Williams’s signature (see figure 6.9). These updated formalities represented recordkeeping transparency, but they also reveal the likelihood that a direct meeting between Williams and persons in need facilitated her charity. Linda Dahl recorded the memory of Delilah Jackson, a “historian of black entertainment” who “wandered into [Williams’s] shop one day in 1960, a single black woman pushing a baby carriage.”

"Seemed like she knew that I needed things," [Jackson] recalled. "She introduced herself, but didn’t say she was a musician, an entertainer, and she asked if I needed anything. I said I didn’t have any money and she said, ‘I didn’t say anything about money, it’s for the kid.’ She gave me a big bag of clothes for the baby. She was still beautiful then and she was so excited about this shop, it seemed like she had found a new love. She’d put like $5 or $10 in my hand; she felt sorry for me. She was trying to do everything she could for me, this went on for six or seven months."^{98}

^{98} Dahl, 267.
To initiate these relationships that created a charitable community, direct and informal encounters between Williams, some musicians, and curious patrons stood alongside professional liaisons for others.

When federal and local financial support appeared insurmountably unfeasible, Williams turned to the Roman Catholic church in an effort to garner its institutional resources. In 1964, Williams began a correspondence with Norman Weyand, a Jesuit priest at Loyola University. Weyand was sympathetic to Williams’ concern to attend to musicians battling substance abuse, mentioning her efforts in a book review he wrote of *The Junkie Priest: Father Daniel Egan, S.A.* by John D. Harris. In June, Weyand sent Williams a copy of the review, which addressed drug abuse as an American problem, claiming the lives of talented African American musicians:

> The handling of the narcotics problem in this country is unquestionably a blot on American sociological, health, and welfare administration, as this volume makes clear. So far as I have been able to learn, other countries, for example Great Britain, are following much more enlightened policies than we in American large cities. My own interest in the problem has been sharpened by the death a few years ago of Billie Holiday, the greatest jazz singer our country has produced—and a tragic victim of environment, segregation, prejudice, and our narcotics politics. Billie, thank God, died in the Catholic Church.

> Just recently, too, a meeting with one of our greatest jazz pianists, the Catholic convert Mary Lou Williams (Cf. *The New Yorker*, May 2, 1964, pp. 52-85), emphasized for me the importance of efforts to help our narcotic addicts. Miss Williams’ chief expenditure of time, outside of her musical work, is devoted to aiding and rehabilitating musicians addicted to drugs through her Bel Canto Foundation.

> Religious would do well to include their prayers and intentions in the Holy Sacrifice people such as Father Egan and Miss Williams and the unfortunate victims whom they are helping with the greatest of self sacrifice.99

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In this review, Weyand placed Williams’s efforts to aid others alongside those of an established Catholic authority, hoping to bring stature to Williams and attention within the Catholic Church to her efforts. Following their correspondence, however, the next month Weyand encouraged Williams to discontinue her effort to establish the Foundation. Commiserating with her desire to realize her mission, he reasoned that Williams listen to her other priest friends and reckon with the structural obstacles preventing her thrift shop’s success:

   And, Mary Lou, I feel just as much in need of prayers 4 my “charity, humility…” as you do. Our dear Lord made us each as we are, and He understands and permits our weaknesses & temptatns. Only in Heaven—the only goal worth striving for—will we understand why this infinitely loving creator and redeemer of each of us has fashioned a world in which men can create such turmoil and injustice.

   From what you tell me, and from what I deduced from [New Yorker writer Whitney Balliett’s] profile of you, you would b wise 2 drop the Bel Canto Foundation. I know that will be a hard decision 2 make. Follow, however, the advice of someone like Fr. Woods, who knows the details of your situation & struggles much better than I. As Father Egan, our “Junkie Priest” discovered, without organized municipal or state backing, effective work among the “dispossessed” of any type can only be carried on along the lines of Dorothy Day or Baroness de Hueck. And you cannot {also} carry on your important work of music and personal charity {and work} the way those women have done, with their full time labor 4 the unfortunates among God’s creatures.100

For Weyand, and likely other Catholic friends, Williams could continue her efforts to practice God’s will for her without the burden of a failing store and perpetual funding setbacks. Weyand suggested that despite her acclaim in the jazz profession, Williams had not attained the religious stature of other prominent Catholic social activist women to garner enough support for her mission beyond reliance on government institutions. And even as Dorothy Day sympathized with Williams in 1968 that “[m]usicians, artists and writers are certainly exploited,” earlier she

could only support the musician through offers to pray for her and to praise her music.\textsuperscript{101} For Weyand and others, Williams’s full-time exertions were ideal for her established musical talents since music remained the realm of her unquestioned instrumental charisma.

The irony of Williams never succeeding in raising the profile and resources of this Foundation was that the constant care for her immediate family diverted her income, which she could have otherwise put towards the Bel Canto mission. As reflected in her checkbook, Williams’s sister, Grace Mickles, and her children were the perpetual recipients of funds for essentials like food, overdue rent, clothing, and bus fare. Williams even paid for Mickles’s life insurance policy. Beyond the care of relatives, included in Williams’s regular expenses were items essential to her embrace of Catholicism: she wrote checks regularly to Our Lady of Lourdes church for $20 worth of prayer candles, $4 for a Catholic pamphlet, $5 for prayers from the Mother Mary Missions, $30 for the Franciscan Missionary, a $25 donation to the poor, and a $400 donation to the Catholic Youth Organization. She recorded her donations to other congregations, like the Holy Rosary Church, St. Leo’s Church, St. Mary’s Catholic Church, and St. Patrick’s Church. In addition to substantial but infrequent personal expenses, like $300 gowns for her concerts, $124 to cover recording session costs, $75 expenses for hair care, the circulation of Williams’s personal income for charitable and business purposes siphoned off potential resources for the Foundation.\textsuperscript{102} Sizable deposits of her own money into the thrift

\textsuperscript{101} Dorothy Day responded with gratitude to Williams’s gift of a statue and a relic for her farm’s chapel: “Someone said Janet [Burwash] had sent it but I knew it was you, bless you. Your card—the fish—was delightful and is in my missal now so I will be remembering you and praying for your daily. Did you know that after the Angelus [prayer], at every meal, we ask St. Martin [de Porres] to pray for us all. May he pray for you most specially.” See “Letter from Dorothy Day to Mary Lou Williams, November 16, 1965,” and “Letter from Dorothy Day to Mary Lou Williams, March 23, 1968,” p. 2, Mary Lou Williams Collection, Institute of Jazz Studies, Series 3: Personal Correspondence, Subseries 3C: Correspondence with Musician, Notables & Students, ca. 1926, 1942, 1947-1949, 1951-1953, 1955-1959, 1961-1981; Box 14, Folder 2 (Dorothy Day, 1968, n.d.). For more on Williams’s interactions with notable radical Catholics, see Dahl, 277.

\textsuperscript{102} Checkbooks and Balance Registers, 1962-1964.
shop’s account, such as personal checks totaling $864, $2,000 in concert revenues, her regular salary of $512.71 for performing at the Hickory House nightclub in New York city, and a bank loan for $2,000, all in 1965, never became enough to offset the store’s preexisting rental debt, overdue utility bills, and her perpetual aid to others.\textsuperscript{103} These expenses accompanied Williams’s support for her mother, by this point ailing from cancer. In part, her immediate charitable generosity and tragic family obligations counteracted the long-term mission she envisioned for a specific musical population.

\textbf{Conclusion}

By 1966, Williams was no longer involved in the daily management of her Bel Canto Thrift Shop. Beyond ongoing fundraising appeals to other prominent Catholics like Dorothy Day, Williams entered into a partnership with Joseph Wells and his wife Ann to fund the Foundation by changing the store from a thrift shop to a high-end boutique featuring African American designers. This partnership ended acrimoniously in 1968, with contract arguments over the use of Williams’s name to promote events in addition to rental and maintenance payments.\textsuperscript{104} As her friends in Catholic ministry desired, Williams focused her primary efforts on composing and performing her sacred jazz music, and she continued to rely on correspondences with priestly friends through letters and telephone calls, in addition to her monastic retreats to New England and Europe. Father Peter O’Brien and Brother Mario Hancock entered her life in the mid-late 1960s, with the former serving as her manager and the latter becoming a reliable confidant.

\textsuperscript{103} “Taxes-Federal Income Taxes, 1965”, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{104} Dahl, 294.
The well-recounted history of Williams’s sacred musical productivity in the 1960s and 1970s establishes her worth in the jazz community as a middle-aged, African American jazz woman whose artistic tastes did not quite suit the younger jazz listening audience. Williams served her Catholic community as a high-profile, celebrity convert, and her friends in the priesthood worked to ensure she was well compensated for her musical corpus and that she mattered to developing narratives of the history of jazz music. However, because of the decisive failure of her efforts in the 1950s and 1960s to establish her Foundation and manage her thrift shop, this substantial portion of her daily life has received passing attention in the public narrative of her career. The May 27, 1971 edition of *Down Beat* magazine recounted the religious journey in the 1950s that took Williams away from jazz music. The profile noted her instruction in the Catholic faith because of Barry Ulanov and Father Woods, in addition to the presence of Father Crowley and Dizzy Gillespie in convincing Williams to return to performing and to begin crafting the musical sounds of her newfound Catholicism. According to the article, “A lot of her time then was spent in meditation. From this came a sense of direction….In spite of a busy life full of good works which even gave her a new sense of fulfillment, she also sensed a certain incompleteness.”\(^{105}\) The article rendered her mission efforts in this brief fashion, lending no weight to the rigor and dedication of a project that appeared futile to almost everyone but Williams herself.

Had Williams decided to affiliate religiously with one of the historic African American Protestant denominations, it is unknown whether her Foundation efforts would have received more concrete institutional support. Her celebrity, professed religious convictions, and desire to engage various public audiences may have afforded her favor, visibility, and support among

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national black middle-class institutions debating the proper course of social action in favor of desegregation, enfranchisement, and increased employment opportunities. Additionally, the range of national black newspapers might have afforded her a larger sympathetic audience for her fundraising—and the black print press also faithfully documented the range of weekend worship options, sermon topics, and church social events for middle-class African American Protestants.

Nevertheless, the turn toward social and political activism for prominent African American Protestant churches in her Harlem neighborhood did not provide time for Williams’s contemplative prayer life, and these denominations certainly lacked the financial resources for constructing monastic spaces that Catholic church’s international history and presence afforded. These she needed at the level of daily existence. The ideal African American church for Williams—one physically removed from a space fraught with social and political contestation—did not exist in New York City. Opposed to allowing the sounds of social discontent to saturate her prayerful contemplation and the musical ideal she sought to create, Williams journeyed to Catholicism alongside trusted friends in her profession and with the advice of new friends in the priesthood. But her embrace of Catholicism also served to rejuvenate her Foundation efforts in the late 1950s and early 1960s, not simply to settle her own soul and revive her creative musical energies.

Williams strived to provide musicians their own contemplative, creative space through her daily labor to realize her Foundation by managing her thrift shop and seeking various fundraising strategies. Incidentally, some of those musicians made daily journeys into her Catholic community through Mass attendance, priestly consultations, and correspondences with Williams herself. For Williams, the labor of her thrift shop activity served an interstitial
purpose—between a sense of divine calling without a specific religious home, and her explicitly Catholic practices and production of sacred jazz. For many other jazz musicians in need, she served as the financial and communal intermediary between personal (and emotional) destitution and professional stability. She sought to create a new social institution with a new understanding of her divine calling. However, it was for the purpose of reviving jazz creativity to forge “good” jazz music, not to make new Catholics. In a 1978 interview, Williams reflected on her assertion that jazz is “God’s gift to the downtrodden people of this world” while responding to a question about her religiosity:

I became a Catholic several years ago, and that changed me a great deal. I used to bemoan the fact that so many of my friends were dead, like Ben Webster and Bud Powell and Errol Garner, but I found out that religion can bring peace to the soul and dedication to the talent that God has given. Now we don’t know if there’s a heaven or a hell or what, but I know that certain things are going to happen in life, and you shouldn’t be lazy about a challenge. You shouldn’t waste the talent that God has sent to you.”

At age 68, Williams entertained the question of the ways older people deal with loneliness. She responded, “I often pray when I am alone, and I often play music. I used to get very upset to see my friends pass away, but since I became a Catholic, I don’t cry that tune anymore. Religion is very comforting.”

Reflecting the vantage of several decades of religious commitment, religious practice (in this instance, prayer) concerned comfort and consolation for Williams, not necessarily an experience of the identifiably miraculous. For Williams, the problem of human mortality was not in wrestling with comprehending resolutely the eternal fate of individual souls. The death of her friends and fellow musicians was loss that disrupted her contentment with life.

107 Holmes and Thomson, 41.
Soul comfort was not in hoping her deceased loved ones were now enjoying heavenly paradise; it was a matter of acquiring the resilience, endurance, and creativity to continue pursuing life. Divine gifts, like musical talent in the jazz world, exist to be practiced, shared, and celebrated in this world. Similarly, if blessings are “divine” in any sense, they were to come from others around the self.

Despite constant financial struggles, Williams asserted, “I’ve never been hungry one day of my life, but I have had some hard times. The one who came to my aid when I was out of money and sleeping on the floor was Dizzy Gillespie….And during the time the priests at the Bel Canto Foundation sent me boxes of stuff. I was just lucky. Maybe praying and reaching God did it; miracles were happening. And since then I’ve tried to help other people who need it.”

The luck or blessings from others that Williams received were to be paid forward, and this was her daily work in her Bel Canto Foundation effort and through her management of her thrift shop. At the end of her life, ailing from bladder cancer in 1981, among the many visits and well-wishing letters that Williams received was a cross-shaped Hallmark card titled “A Get-Well Prayer,” with the inscriptions “Peace and Love from All of Us, Eustis.” Surrounding Guillemet’s message were the signatures of many musicians associated with the musical revue, Ain’t Misbehavin, named after a 1929 Fats Waller composition and celebrating the jazz culture of the 1920s and 1930s: pianist Hank Jones, trumpeter Virgil Jones, tenor saxophonist and flutist Seldon Powell, bassist Arvell Shaw, baritone saxophonist Frank Haywood Henry, and trombonist Barry Maur. This ultimate communication revealed the success of Williams’s

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108 Holmes and Thomson, 42.
labor to create accountability in her profession, to know that some of the many musicians she aided were alive and performing, that they remained grateful to her, and that some even prayed for her.
Conclusion
Afro-Protestant Cultural Expression and Representation

My central interest in this dissertation has been to explore jazz as an artistic profession to uncover intersections of racial representation and expressions of religious belief among African American musicians in the twentieth century. My archival research revealed religious representations, reflections, and practices for public consumption and private contemplation that produced this dissertation’s thematic chapter arrangement. Through this arrangement, a select group of professional jazz musicians serves effectively as a set of case studies to entertain broader field questions and subjects in the study of twentieth-century African American religious lives: racialized religious discourses, potentially ambivalent modes of religious affiliation, racialized interpretations of sacred texts, religious narratives of African history, the religious aspects of race representation, the performance of religious and racial identities for public consumption, women’s religious leadership, personal theologies, and the compatibility of non-religious African American professional occupations with the objectives for progressive racial activism of African American clergy and religious institutions. Following this work, I became aware of the benefit of rethinking scholars’ narrative placement of African American Protestant institutions and actors to account for the complexity of beliefs, representations, and practices related to this denominational landscape. Consequently, I offer a theoretical framework of Afro-Protestantism which emerges from this research both as a useful way of understanding my material on the jazz profession and to reframe our understanding of a twentieth-century African American religious landscape in which black Protestants occupy considerable narrative territory—most often as protagonists for the cause of progressive religious activism, and as antagonists for emerging religious alternatives and comparatively more radical social activists.
This dissertation participates in a turn toward archives of cultural production, a constructive response to Judith Weisenfeld’s assessment that scholarship in African American religious history has focused largely on a concern for understanding the politics and political activism of religious actors and institutions at the expense of interrogating theological and cultural production by African Americans.\(^1\) Weisenfeld writes,

The dominance of the political narrative has brought to the fore certain aspects of African American religious life, such as moments of resistance, mobilization, and electoral politics, but it has offered little insight into the cultures, theologies, and spiritual experiences of black religion in the United States. Recent scholarship on the cultures of African American religious life, including music, the visual arts of painting, photography, and film, and media such as phonograph records, radio, and television, has highlighted the richness of these sources for the study of black religion. Attention to African American religion in literature, theater, and other arts in recent work has also broadened the source base for scholarship and underscored the complex engagements between the mainstream of orthodox black Protestant Christianity and the post-Christian, the secular, and religious alternatives.\(^2\)

In Weisenfeld’s assessment of African American religious studies more broadly, the field has “…tended to give priority to political activity as more significant and socially transformative than cultural production.”\(^3\) Weisenfeld’s instruction for the specific field of African American

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\(^1\) In her words, Weisenfeld “approach[es] the study of African American religious life primarily from the methodological perspective of the discipline of history, employing and interpreting evidence from the past (which may be textual, visual, material, sonic, or embodied, for example) to ask questions about social change and continuity.” See Judith Weisenfeld, “Invisible Women: On Women and Gender in the Study of African American Religious History,” *Journal of Africana Religions* vol. 1, no. 1 (2013): 135-136.


\(^3\) Weisenfeld’s broader charge for the field is to regard black women’s cultural production as a generative repository of black women’s theological articulation: “When scholars in the field of African American religious history have engaged black women’s cultural work, they have tended to acknowledge them as cultural innovators but have seen them less as theological thinkers than as conduits of established theological discourses. Valuing these types of sources as significant for our understanding of African Americans’ theological thinking and lived theology, as well as political theorizing, would not only make it possible to bring the questions and concerns that drive these women’s cultural production to the center of the narrative but would also open up new ways of thinking about black men’s theological works in the arts.” “Invisible Women,” 140.
religious history decouples black religious existence from the narratives and timelines of African American political history as its fundamental determinants. I intend for my dissertation to represent a significant contribution to Weisenfeld’s call for “insight into the cultures, theologies, and spiritual experiences of black religion in the United States.” And my proposed reconsideration of Afro-Protestantism may help to move beyond the usage of concepts like “the mainstream of orthodox black Protestant Christianity” which many narratives of African American religions posit as the conceptual opponent or competitor to “the post-Christian, the secular, and religious alternatives.”

I view Afro-Protestantism not as an institutional establishment but as a movement or mode of cultural production, in part, to reframe these “complex engagements” beyond a reliance upon frameworks of institutional religious competition. Such frameworks rely, in turn, upon the notion that religious expressions tend to coalesce ultimately in recognizable institutional structures to qualify as religions. My concept also suggests that African American religious history move beyond reliance upon terms within religious studies like the post-Christian or the secular, concepts not initially introduced with African American religious subjects and their productivity in mind. These terms are not likely the most theoretically representative of African American practices of religious affiliation and expression in the twentieth century (although their

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4 Weisenfeld also notes that traditional approaches within African American religious history are “tightly bound up in what seems to me a sense in the historiography of the inevitability of particular forms of Protestant commitment among African Americans,” in addition to a problematic “…explicit or implicit move to make African American religion and Protestantism coterminous” that limits a focus on black women’s religious work and alternative black religions. “Invisible Women,” 140.

5 The language of (visible) institutions tends to support the construction of narratives pitting religious establishments against religious alternatives or insurgents. This framework, promoting the concept of an African American religious establishment, is not the most useful for comprehending all the types of religious activity and cultural production of the African Americans who were familiar in their lives (to varying degrees) with African American Protestant thought and practice—and not useful for assessing the relative social authority of African American Protestant institutions.
study within African American religious life maintains value).\textsuperscript{6} By harnessing conceptually the transitory qualities and permeability of Afro-Protestant ways of speaking and representing, as they appear across conventional religious institutional spaces, with emerging professions, and in artistic commodifications of African American religion (whether the artist’s intention is sincere representation, humorous satire, theological innovation, or religious criticism), I work to reset twentieth-century African American Protestantism within a discussion that does not privilege narratives of contests between African American religions as institutions. Moreover, my scholarly motivation is to emphasize potentially durable cultural presences (e.g., the influential themes of Afro-Protestant sacred histories in jazz album compositions) rather than emphasize political or institutional absences in time (e.g., the decline of black Protestant church authority with the rise of black popular culture in urban centers).

It is important to state that generating or arriving at precise terminology for the meaning-making institutions, routines, ways of speaking, theological interpretations, or social/public practices that African American religious subjects produce is not the principal goal of scholarship in the field of African American religious history. The creation or application of terms is secondary to identifying African American religious subjects and the new sacred orders they set out to realize, in Wallace Best’s language. This dissertation is an endeavor to emphasize the value both of seeking out unconventional archives as sources for religious production and of

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\textsuperscript{6} Here, I do not imply a blanket opposition to concepts that aren’t “local” to African American religious subjects. Because I view theorizing as an exercise in conceptual organizing, nothing is automatically off-limits in the pursuit of productive frameworks that open up new archival or methodological avenues in the study of African American religions. My hope is that the Afro-Protestant category I offer serves as an example of a productive framework that organizes my dissertation research in one way, alongside existing studies of black Protestants, in order to generate further, novel examinations of archives of cultural production. If it is more fruitful to produce theoretical concepts following engagement with the archive, as opposed to initially theorizing about what constitutes the archive, then one result of this dissertation work is the suggestion of a category that also throws into question the (universal) suitability of other theoretical terminology in the study of religion in America. Ultimately, post-Christian, the secular, or “the Black church” are not very productive concepts or labels for descriptive historical studies of African American religions.
revisiting conventional archives in order to comprehend African American expressions of belief and representations of race in various professions and through persons who refigured the role of racial and religious representation beyond the place of black clergy. The principal thrust of this dissertation is methodological, demonstrating the value of identifying and interpreting African American cultural production in the jazz profession for its archival significance to researching twentieth century African American religious history. Nevertheless, the professional and personal lives of the African American jazz men and women, who are the subjects of this historical research, emerge as representing engagements with culture parallel, indebted to, and responsive to black Protestants’ cultural engagements.

As I established in the introduction, this dissertation frames twentieth-century Afro-Protestantism as characterized by (1) the consciously and racially representative articulation of religious belief; (2) the practice of religious affiliation which permitted and celebrated an irreverent (dis)regard for—or suspicion of—institutional religious leadership, often resulting in critical cultural productions; (3) a racialized approach to reading (through and around) scripture that was subject to contemporaneous studies of antiquity and afforded recognition of the modern West’s history of African enslavement and Jim Crow legacy; and (4) the affirmation or generation of alternative racial, professional, and gendered concepts of religious leadership through novel ways of speaking and acting in public.

The first characteristic finds expression in this dissertation with chapter one on the work and critical discourses of religious race professionals. The second is most evident in Cab Calloway’s irreverent African American religious commodifications in chapter two and in some of Ella Fitzgerald’s gospel and preacherly performances in chapter four—strongly indicating that further studies of irreverent religious humor will enrich the field of African American religious
history with more portraits of complex religious affiliation and participation. The third captures the theological and artistic production of chapter three. Lastly, the fourth represents most explicitly the pretext informing the missions of Ellington and Williams in chapters five and six, while also reflecting the host of African American clergy, playwrights, press writers, professional musicians, academics, and private social service providers the entire dissertation surveys. In general, Afro-Protestantism represented middle-class African American cultural production, with its producers assuming professional careers for their race representation and expressions of belief.

Admittedly, my examination of Mary Lou Williams’s business archive, mission, and Roman Catholic identification in the sixth dissertation chapter stands as the thematic outlier in my rethinking of Afro-Protestantism. Overall, Part II of the dissertation is an archival exercise to trace religious practice among twentieth-century African Americans in the jazz profession in complicated religious contexts. In these narratives of Ellington and Williams, an Afro-Protestant social and cultural presence remains an important pretext but casts a lighter shadow in comparison to the four thematic focuses on Afro-Protestant cultural production in Part I. The religious affiliations of both pianists reflect personal motivations to find religious community as well as to define their religious missions and positions of leadership beyond black Protestant churches. Williams’s affiliation with Roman Catholicism followed her individual religious journey that evinced the consequential Afro-Protestant presence in the theologies she articulated as a street preacher. Additionally, activist black Protestant churches and representatives of the Adam Clayton Powell Foundation became the institutional foils for her notions of personal peace and religious charity to jazz musicians. Ellington’s affiliation with white mainline Protestant figures and theologies was predicated upon his identity as a “messenger boy” to American and
European houses of worship who was familiar with the Afro-Protestant sacred musical traditions of his black Protestant religious upbringing. Consequently, my offering of a concept of Afro-Protestantism does not center the religious missions of Ellington and Williams late in their lives. However, it depends upon their personal religious lives as reflections upon the relative scope of Afro-Protestant cultural and social influence at mid-century, particularly for African Americans who did not affiliate with newer black religious traditions. And given that the wealth of print archival sources for African American Protestants has supported their construction by scholars as a religious establishment or orthodox religious presence, for African American religious historians to continue to expand the concept of the sources and professions that are generative for religious production results in a broader archive that enables a reevaluation of the relative place and prominence of black Protestants’ work in the twentieth century.7

In order to shift the scholarship’s location of religious productivity away from an institutional determinism, I advocate reframing Afro-Protestantism in terms of culture and religious movement.8 Instead of a framework of competition, wherein one dominant black

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7 “Establishment” or “orthodox” labels for African American Protestantism come from the aforementioned Weisenfeld publications, and the specific notion of “the black Protestant establishment” is found in David W. Wills, “An Enduring Distance: Black Americans and the Establishment,” in Between the Times: The Travail of the Protestant Establishment in America, 1900-1960, ed. William R. Hutchison, 168-192. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

8 My construction of “Afro-Protestantism” differs from the work of scholar of African American literature Frances Smith Foster, whose concept of Afro-Protestantism works principally to interpret the relationship of black religious literature to (and within) the history of African American Protestantism beyond my focus on the first half of the twentieth century. Important for Foster’s concept of Afro-Protestantism, which she deploys to interpret African American literature, is the function of “The Word” both in African culture and in Euro-American Protestantism: “…[F]olk culture, whether it be talking drums or stories told around the fire, sustained, succored and salvaged African and African-American cultural concepts. If these ideas have a basis in fact, it should be apparent that Protestantism, particularly the personally expressive and empowering versions that characterized such fundamental revivals as the Great Awakenings, could conjure awake the spirits of authority within African-Americans and lead them to reassert themselves and their relationships to the world of The Word. Afro-Protestantism emerges and African-American writing flourishes during eras of religious fervor and social change in part because Protestantism empowers individuals, disestablishes the intermediaries and asserts the democratic principles of direct access to God and direct commissions from God to proclaim the good news.” Elsewhere, Foster describes Afro-Protestantism as “an organic synthesis of African, European, and new-world theologies, traditions, and exigencies that was as much political as personal.” However, I benefit from Foster’s construction of Afro-Protestant literary production in its relation to other forms of cultural production. One institutional manifestation of Afro-Protestantism in the nineteenth century was “the
religious institution of black Protestants clashes with alternative and emerging black religious camps for theological, economic, and spatial control of an urban stronghold in an era of migrations, the concept of Afro-Protestantism places one sizeable black religious raft alongside other black religious vessels flowing down an historical stream in the twentieth century.

Afro-Protestantism as Construction of Culture

Ultimately, seemingly disparate movements in late nineteenth-century and twentieth-century African American history that represented divergent political strategies and cultural interests—Pan-Africanism, middle-class racial uplift, postwar modern middle-class black Protestantism, Harlem Renaissance folklorization, mass black popular music in jazz and swing as race representation, and the pursuit of desegregation and integration through cultural politics—shared major cultural threads in African American religious men and women’s cultural production. In relative terms, African American Protestant Christianity is a young religious identity, given that its existence in large institutional numbers began shortly after the Civil War. Rather than representing the dissipation of power, influence, or authority for black Protestant institutions, the culture of public production and modes of representative leadership this collection of black religious denominations produced influenced some jazz musicians in their creative representations of racial identity and religious belief and practice. As chapter three

creation of publishing organizations and institutions as well as the Afro-Protestant press’s role in encouraging writers and readers by providing outlets for writers, sources for readers[,] and encouragement for each to become the other.” This Afro-Protestant press included church publications and, following the Civil War, periodicals devoted to the arts and sciences, autobiographies, novels, and plays. The Afro-Protestant press also “advertise[d] and support[ed] schools and colleges, literary society and cultural projects.” Lastly, Foster writes, “Afro-Protestant periodicals printed church business and advertised fraternal or sororal meetings. They included poetry and fiction along with transcriptions of public lecture sand news of marriages, deaths, social events, religious celebrations, and travel experiences. Magazines reprinted information from newspapers, and indeed, in some cases, the same people published both the newspaper and the magazine. Fiction and poetry that often incorporated current events gleaned from periodicals were published in Afro-Protestant newspapers.” See Frances Smith Foster and Chanta Haywood, “Christian Recordings: Afro-Protestantism, Its Press, and the Production of African-American Literature,” Religion & Literature vol. 27, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 15-33; and Frances Smith Foster, “A Narrative of the Interesting Origins and (Somewhat) Surprising Development of African-American Print Culture,” American Literary History vol. 17, no. 4 (Winter 2005): 714-740.
details, Afro-Protestant sacralization of the African continent through narratives of their ancient racial history fostered reverence of non-Christian or non-Hebrew ancestors and the development of racialized readings of scripture. This orientation meant that Afro-Protestants sowed theological seeds in African American culture for revering theistic African ancestors, both in ancient African civilizations and in the embrace of traditional West African ancestors and religions in the mid-twentieth century. With Afro-Protestantism, initial appreciations of the African continent were romantic appreciations of static and primitive notions of African traditional religions; nevertheless, the decades of Afro-Protestant cultural production of racial and religious identification with African ancestry cultivated later flowerings of African Americans who would embrace African cultures and indigenous religions differently, as innovative adherents and practitioners. As chapters five and six also reveal, the culture that African American middle-class Protestant professionals shaped encouraged individuals like Williams and Ellington in their determination to shape their own theologies and practices, and to (re)define the composition of their religious communities in ways that fostered interracial religious conversations and unique concepts of religious leadership.

As a field, African American religious history recognizes that black religious women and men with Holiness-Pentecostal or rural Baptist roots and affiliations contributed a distinct Southern black religious culture to early twentieth-century African American religious practices, evident in the emergence of new musical styles, makeshift storefront religious spaces, charismatic religious practices, and mass market sermons on race records and over radio broadcasts during the Great Migration era. I assert that scholarly language attentive to the potentially durable contributions of middle-class black Protestants across the American South and North would benefit from a concept of Afro-Protestantism, which describes a distinct and
identifiable contribution to African American culture from middle-class black subjects in this
same period and beyond.

Afro-Protestantism as Religious Movement

Afro-Protestantism captures a robust, oppositional, and self-conscious ethnic/racial
articulation and practice of scriptural interpretation through “preaching” in various forms, or
cultural production. As the representatives of an oppositional phenomenon, Afro-Protestants like
chapter one’s religious race professionals have expressed an explicit “protest” of the preexisting
forms of Protestant Christianity while often simultaneously attempting to dialogue with its
official representatives and adherents in their various denominations (and their “Protestantism” is
also evident in black men and women’s self-authorization to create their own institutions if they
cannot achieve authority within preexisting ones, including churches, para-church associations,
denominations, schools, and print press outlets). Given that this production of culture to assert
and practice an alternative conception of Protestantism was relatively nascent, having begun in
the late nineteenth century, it may be useful to regard Afro-Protestantism in the first half of the
twentieth century as a religious movement in the modern world. As a “movement” like
evangelicalism, Holiness-Pentecostalism, New Thought metaphysics, alternative religio-racial
communities during the Great Migration, or Prosperity/Word of Faith, Afro-Protestantism in the
twentieth century bore the potential to impact African Americans across traditional religious
denominations, even if they converted to or affiliated with them, as the religious leadership and
practice of Duke Ellington and Mary Lou Williams within white liberal Protestantism and
Roman Catholicism, respectively, attest. Conceived as a movement, Afro-Protestantism also
impacted popular mass culture—ostensibly the non-religious public arena of African American
life and entertainment—and chapters two, three, and four reveal that its popular public bearers
represented varying degrees of (ir)reverence for the religious mores, practices, and pious representatives through their commodification of Afro-Protestant cultural forms.

The purpose of this theoretical suggestion, to reframe African American Protestantism as an Afro-Protestant religious movement, is to uproot and unsettle the concept of a set of black Protestant religious actors which exists as an establishment or norm against which other meaningful alternative religious groups and movements have emerged in twentieth-century African American religious history. If scholars continue to uncover historical studies that reveal alternative religious groups and alternative configurations of religious belonging among African Americans—supposedly as the alternatives to a black Protestant norm—then the scholarly landscape will reflect an historical reality in which black Protestant churches never were a norm in any consequential (social or cultural) fashion, or one in which they never existed long enough as the sole religious authority in African American societies to establish themselves as the norm. My motivation for suggesting a movement framework rests in recognizing the relatively limited temporal duration of all religions, beliefs, and practices of African-descended peoples in the modern world, and to orient the scholarship to anticipate the transitory nature of religious beliefs and practices as phenomena capable of evolution and dissipation as their historical actors age, migrate, transition in class status, debate their institutions and beliefs with invested progeny, harness technological and social innovations to produce new cultural forms and practices, and die.\(^9\) I adopt a position that all African American religious institutions are relatively too young

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\(^9\) I operate with the assumption that African Americans and their cultural productivity will continue to exist for centuries, at the very least, like most other cultures, even as the racial category of “African American” shifts and evolves according to further generations of (inter)racial procreation and geographic migration and movement. Attendant with continuing black existence is my stance that African American production of religious communities, institutions, symbols, artistic expressions, material culture, and theologies will also remain active cultural practices for as long as humans exist. Consequently, this dissertation in general, and this theoretical effort in particular, reflect the anticipation of continuously-evolving black cultural forms over the coming centuries and seeks to reframe a set of institutions, actors, artistic forms, and theological articulations in light of either their potential long-term historical
to be considered subject to concepts of secularization applicable to Western Christianities and formerly Christian nation-states, empires, and colonies. Consequently, labeling black Protestants as comprising a Christian “establishment” among African Americans, in order to further a narrative of a unified, dominant ecclesial authority against which popular culture and a diversity of emerging religions competes and ultimately triumphs, exaggerates black Protestants’ relative power and social authority throughout African American history and across the variety of cultural practices in African American life.

Similarly, the subjects of study within African American religious institutions are almost universally excluded from the history of wielding state power as imperial nations, wherein theology and religious authorities held (or once held) political power. The “long” story of any African American religious institution is not a trajectory of decline in political, social, economic power or a loss of monopolization of public space. Such narrative tracks do not apply well to the institutions of black people who never achieved political authority and maintained it for generations. These terms and frameworks were designed for “world religions,” many with millennia of existence, and a world religions framework (one that often contains a host of viability or as evidence of a relatively finite movement with legacies beyond the period(s) of its most intense visibility and productivity.

10 The concepts of secularism and post-Christianity have been applied to white Western nations with established Christian churches that no longer exist as such, with religious institutions and ceremonies having no mandated adherence or affiliation. Because Christian nationalism did not apply to the enslaved or free black experience in the United States, the concept of post-Christianity does not apply to the black Protestant landscape that emerged in large numbers following Emancipation and was attempting to secure an institutional presence in growing urban American contexts in the early twentieth century. With regard to religious studies overall, I do not give credence to the idea of the secular in general, because I do not regard the history of Western Christianities as having been thoroughly hegemonic or uniform at the mundane level of practice and interior belief (although the idea of Christian nations against other nations was a definite political reality). Similarly, I think it is a straightforward case to argue that collectives of religious actors and institutions have always impacted lawmaking in the American nation, despite the intended separation of religious institutions and political authorities into distinct spheres of church and state.

11 The work of this dissertation supports my contention that the scholarship Judith Weisenfeld has forged and influenced ultimately reveals that there really never was a black Protestant establishment and that black religious actors were (and are) complex, even within the communities conceived as the religious norm with large membership numbers and many churches throughout black America.
conceptual debates) may provide an imprecise lexicon for African American religions as they have undergone various types of transitions. By rethinking African American Protestants, or the black Protestant mainline, or the black Protestant middle class, as representatives of a movement or of an essentially transitory phenomenon in pursuit of eventual long-term institutional space and power—understanding that the absolute control of state authority within the United States has been impossible for black subjects who also chose not to acquire statehood through militaristic means—I offer a concept of Afro-Protestantism as a presence for scholars to uncover in (novel and conventional) archives, a mode of discourse to hear and interpret in the public actors it influences, and a religious orientation toward constructing historical narratives of black subjectivity.

Shifting from the notion of African American Protestant institutions as comprising a religious establishment to an Afro-Protestant movement with pervasive cultural presences provides a scholarly benefit: introducing studies of gendered archives and institutions in African American religious history will not need to rely on narratives of black religious organizations and traditions framed exclusively in gendered terms of black men’s institutional dominance and black women’s resistance. Foundational scholarship on black women’s influential work and organizations among African American religious subjects has made their presence clear alongside black male denominational establishment and leadership, in addition to black male religious leaders’ political involvement and roles as racially representative brokers with elite white Americans. Because scholarship has shown that black Protestant men and women have debated constantly the value of their social authority and the effectiveness of their race representation to the majority society for the entire existence of black Protestant denominations, scholars need not appropriate narrative framing language that relies on fundamental gendered
oppositions between men and women. Such language would assume that black male religious leadership always bore meaningful authority within black America and as race representatives beyond it, a conclusion constantly undermined by irreverence in African American cultural production and rhetoric (in dissertation chapter two), in addition to black women and men’s criticism of clergy and churches in the press (in dissertation chapter one). At this scholarly moment, studies of African American religions in the twentieth century have shown (and will continue to show) thoroughly that religious actors who were not educated, heterosexual, black male Protestant clergy pursued cultural production and social engagement through a variety of (emerging) professional outlets, evident in the arts as this dissertation’s focus on the jazz profession shows. To think of Afro-Protestantism as an influential mode of public engagement that incorporates all practices of organization-building, institution-making, and expressive artistic culture opens the field’s archival gaze to black women and men seeking to remedy social problems and imbalances through all means, bearing any and all personal dispositions and persuasions, and speaking publicly as race representatives in a variety of ways.

Regarding Afro-Protestantism as a movement allows us to conceive of it as one strand of theological articulation, religious practice, and mode of public engagement alongside other significant religious movements in African American life. Replacing a concept of black Protestantism solely as identifiable institutional locations, particularly denominations and church congregations, with the concept of Afro-Protestantism as a movement and culture recognizes these traditional black Protestant religious spaces as susceptible to change according to the debates that emerged with the influx of black migrants and with the varieties of recreational and leisure culture available to younger generations of African Americans that threatened to relocate their social life away from church time and space. For the black Baptist and Methodist churches
that existed before, during, and after the migrations of new black populations and their successive generations, theological developments like the introduction of the varieties of American metaphysical theology in sermons and songs, liturgical modifications that adjusted worship services to anticipate (or accommodate musically) charismatic “Holy Spirit” possession presences through shouting and dancing, and musical changes such as a shift from arranged spirituals to gospel styles, all represented not the waning of institutional presence, but the presences of other cultural movements within African American religions.

In relative terms, all of these black religions as movements were and are novel, and their institutional presences are nascent and insecure. This relative newness was particularly evident among black Protestants in their social scientific studies and black press commentary that sought to diagnose church/denominational “growth” and “decline,” producing attempts to stem the flood of younger members from established congregations into smaller “alternative” religious communities or into popular leisure and recreational culture. This academic evidence of institutional insecurity indicates that it is imprecise to speak of black Protestants as constituting an intraracial hegemon in the first half of the twentieth century. There were police raids of religious institutions and press exposés targeting religious leaders like Father Divine in order to label them religious frauds; however, black Protestants lacked effective methods of policing African American religious affiliations or of quashing these new religions as challenges to individual black churches’ authority within local communities (or that of ministerial associations opposing other new religious movements). Because African American religious existence in the

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12 By the evidence of the religious and non-religious black press, to cite numerical majorities for black Protestant denominations was significant for their status as racial representatives to white (religious) America. However, these numbers were not indicative of consistent or enforced standards of black Protestant theology, worship practices, or the effective setting of standards of individual “morality” (pertaining to the “crisis” of recreational culture) for their members or the black youth they targeted for conformity and dedicated membership.
United States is subject to disestablishment, a court system to adjudicate disputes between and within churches, and histories of racial hierarchy limiting black access to capital and preventing the outright monopolization of public and private spaces black people inhabited, it has never been possible for black Protestant churches to declare and exercise uncontested authority by eradicating alternative religious leaders, communities, the institutions they produce, and the religious rhetoric they were able to introduce into black public spheres. Afro-Protestantism was culturally ubiquitous at the same time that its visible African American institutions and actors shared a public religious arena with alternative religio-racial possibilities for expression of belief and representation of racial identity. Therefore, the value of adopting the language of an Afro-Protestant movement is that it allows for an appreciation of the consequential cultural presence and legacy for black Protestant religious subjects and their cultural work at the same time that it recognizes the ultimately insecure stature of black Protestant institutional power and authority for quotidian African American existence.

To shift from viewing black Protestants in the twentieth century in the language of institutions to employing concepts of Afro-Protestantism as cultural production and religious movement enables a move away from the complicated phrase “the Black Church.” Signifying the collectivity of African American Christian denominations in this manner has allowed scholars and religious practitioners to speak normatively of black religious practices in history—

13 While the various black Protestant denominations certainly expressed the desire for status as race representatives and strived to rid their communities of black religious leaders and groups they viewed as charlatans, urban religious policing by black religious actors occurred in contexts that were not secure social territory for black people, given their perpetual existence as surveilled subjects. Because of African American social insecurity and religious diversity, even within black Protestantism, it becomes difficult to assert the existence or enforcement of black Protestant orthodoxy across the various denominations and in regions containing black Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, and others. Chapter one in this dissertation reveals the (relative) theological and liturgical diversity that different middle-class black Protestant race representatives and churches encouraged and tolerated within their Christian practice, evidence opposing narratives that characterize these Protestants as pursuing orthodoxy.
while sometimes posturing as offering simply a descriptive history. Subsequently, academics, theologians, and clergy have castigated this artificial, monolithic, transhistorical religious “actor”—the Black Church—for failing to embody the progressive activism found in the history of many prominent African American Christian women and men. Among the many scholars who have criticized the contemporary deployment of this phrase, historian of American religions Kathryn Lofton provides a compelling description of this problematic phrase. In part, Lofton ponders the inability of American religious historians to identify and interrogate the complexities and nuances in the beliefs of individual African American religious subjects, both female and male, and she places some blame on “the Black Church” as an “obscuring image”—an historical construct that late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century historians, anthropologists, and sociologists created which that has allowed scholars to “rely on a generalized sense of black faithfulness, without taking the time to pursue the particularities of individuated African American faith commitments.”

Recent scholarship in African American religious history acknowledges that there was never a “Black Church” that existed as a race institution analogous to “the (Roman Catholic) Church.” The closest possibility for there to be a large, unified Protestant denomination came with the efforts to unite the various black Methodist denominations in the early twentieth century. However, such a creation still would not have been comparable to the Roman Catholic denomination because of the presence of black Baptists (in greater numbers than the collective of black Methodists), Holiness-Pentecostals, and black congregations within white Protestant and

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Catholic denominations. Neither was there a single black Protestant denomination that championed something scholars can identify as a “black liberal Protestant” tradition, although academic schools of thought exposed ministers with higher education to the movements of biblical criticism, comparative religious studies, and the Social Gospel which, in turn, impacted their conversations in black religious newspapers, affected their denominational seminary training, and altered their missions to working-class black migrants. In the early twentieth century, these intellectual, social, and theological presences manifested not only in some black Protestant pulpits but also within the cultural production of African Americans who emerged from black Protestant churches.

For African Americans in the mid-twentieth century, public religious expression always entailed race representation, and both forms of representation and expression are markers of broader trends and possibilities for religious belief, practice, and articulation for African Americans in these years. For scholars of American religion, my work throughout this dissertation and in the recasting of Afro-Protestantism demonstrates that engaging the public and private archives of African American jazz musicians reveals complex individual and communal religious identities, expressions, and practices. These complexities, in turn, allow us to view African American women and men in their efforts to define precisely their religious roles and affiliations as well as articulating belief in their personal and professional lives. In different generations, classes, regions, and emerging professions, black religious women and men’s professional labor and cultural production expressed directly or revealed indirectly the contested

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nature of their collective identities, individual commitments, and any institutional forms they forged as representations of—and representative voices for—African Americans.
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Film and Television

