

Unessay: Black Women and Queer People in the Gospel Music Genre
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Preface

This project focuses on the contributions of black women and black queer individuals to the gospel genre, primarily in the 19th and 20th centuries. While researching, I looked specifically for songs that were written, composed, or sung by African American women and queer people and commented on the unique struggles they faced living in America. However, I found it difficult to find gospel songs that were written specifically with women's or queer people's struggles in mind. As a result, some of the songs I selected are not explicitly religious, but I included them because I felt they still discussed important ideas that we've covered in this course, especially topics about women's experiences with racism, and most of the singers I chose were involved with gospel music at some point in their career. Also, in some cases, the lyrics to the songs I chose did not directly mention women or queer people, but they can all still be interpreted as representative of their experiences. In short, although my criteria shifted throughout the research process in terms of picking what songs to study, my focus remained on highlighting the voices of black women and queer people in gospel and related music genres like jazz and blues.

Playlist

<https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PL8IjrznvQk9IQs1CGHnOpjXj5Qv5cARzx>

Song Analysis

1. "I'm a Poor Li'l Orphan in This Worl'" – Julia Perry (composer) & Shirley Verrett (voice)

Julia Perry was a widely known female African American composer, peaking in popularity in the late 1960s. She graduated college in 1948, later training at Julliard and with composers in Europe. Throughout her life, she composed twelve symphonies, two concertos, three operas, and many other small pieces. She also taught music classes, conducted concerts, and won several awards for her compositions. One of her most well-known compositions was this piece, based off a traditional African American spiritual that talks about being an orphaned child that feels unable to stay in their home after losing their family. Many black children were separated from their families while enslaved and were left without the support of their parents, so a spiritual like this would've been important to many people at the time and would've helped them handle their trauma. Similarly, this effect of slavery was extremely difficult for mothers, as their children were stolen away from them, and they sometimes never would've seen them again, making this an especially impactful spiritual for black women who either experienced this or had relatives who suffered from family separation.

2. “Obeah Woman” – Nina Simone (voice)

The voice behind this piece is the black singer and songwriter Nina Simone, who was said to have a “God-given gift of music” at a young age. She studied classical music growing up and was eventually picked up by a record label, growing in popularity and becoming a prominent figure in the music industry. She was also very active in the fight for civil rights, using her music to comment on the social climate of the time. In this song, Simone sings about an Obeah woman, a term used for women who take a shamanic role in the practice of Obeah, an African religion and system of magical practice used to help people who are oppressed feel empowered. Obeah women were influential leaders in many religious African American communities; Simone made this clear in her lyrics, saying “There ain’t nothing that I can’t do” and “We’ve outgrown [the church] now”. However, the responsibilities of Obeah women and the unique type of discrimination they faced for both their gender and practices often weighed down on them and made the women feel a sense of urgency for change, as she conveys through the lyrics “The weight is too heavy / Let’s finish it”. Her story of the Obeah woman shows the clear connections between African religion, racial discrimination, and sexism and delivers a powerful message for black women.

3. “Move On Up a Little Higher” – Mahalia Jackson (voice)

Mahalia Jackson, considered the “Queen of Gospel Song,” was a powerful singer and possibly one of the most important figures in the gospel music industry. Her music career was kickstarted at age 16 after joining a Chicago choir, and she started recording songs in 1934 and performing on tours, for the radio and on television. One of her most famous songs, “Move On Up a Little Higher,” is an uplifting and motivational song that looks to a future where you can “lay down [your] heavy burdens” and find peace. Jackson sings about how she’s “been climbing over hills and mountains”, likely referencing the hardships that an African American woman living in the mid-1900s like her would have experienced, and how she looks forward to the day where she can put her troubles behind and have a better life. The feelings she expresses are ones that most black women in 1947, the year of the song’s release, would have been experiencing as they dealt with racism and sexism in all aspects of their lives. There are also numerous religious references throughout the song regarding the afterlife, including her saying she’ll meet Paul and Silas, go to God’s alter, and “live on, up in Glory”, demonstrating the importance of Christianity to people in this era as a way of having a better afterlife to look forward to.

4. “Nobody Knows De Trouble I’ve Seen” – Marian Anderson (voice)

Marian Anderson was born in 1897 and began singing in the choir at her local church. In 1925, she won a singing contest and was taken to train in Europe and sing opera. She built a reputation there then moved back to America in 1935 where she continued gaining exposure and popularity. Another traditional African American spiritual, “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen” was created during the era of slavery and has been covered numerous times, with Marian Anderson’s cover being one of the most famous. This spiritual also references the difficulties that African

Americans experienced living in a severely racist America, but in Marian Anderson's version, it does so in a very melancholy tone. She sings about praying for God to take away her sins and sorrows, displaying both a feeling of desperation for things to change and feelings of hope found from religion. The original lyrics also expressed a trust in Christianity to free people from their "trials here below" and send them to Heaven. Although not explicitly related to women's rights, black women and queer people experienced unique troubles due to their intersectional identities, and Marian Anderson covering this song likely had more meaning for black women than it would've when a man sang it.

5. "Mother to Son" – Undine Smith Moore (composer), Langston Hughes (lyrics), Yolanda Williams (voice)

Although not widely known today, Undine Smith Moore is considered the "Dean of Black Women Composers" and won numerous awards for her compositions. She studied music at Fisk University where she began composing, and she was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize for one of her songs, which was based on the work of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Her composition for "Mother to Son", originally a poem written by Langston Hughes, portrays a mother speaking to her son about the importance of not giving up, even during difficult times. The woman tells her son that her life has been far from easy, but she's continued fighting through it despite all the roadblocks, encouraging the son in the poem to do the same. This speech is one that many black mothers likely would have given to their children, as they were often fully responsible for taking care of them and would have passed on life lessons they learned through their own difficult experiences. Their message of not stepping down when life became hard was also incredibly important in an era when African Americans were at a severe societal disadvantage and were facing unimaginable compared to white people.

6. "Freedom Trilogy" – Odetta Holmes (voice)

Odetta Holmes, known as the "queen of American folk music," was born in Alabama and began studying music in Los Angeles, later discovering folk music in San Francisco. She released multiple best-selling folk albums, acted in films and TV specials, and performed at the March on Washington in 1963. This piece sang by Holmes is a combination of three traditional African American spirituals: "Oh Freedom", "Come and Go With Me", and "I'm On My Way". Her rendition of "Oh Freedom" focuses on the belief that African Americans would rather die and be free in heaven than be a slave during their life on Earth. This spiritual could have been even more impactful on enslaved black women, as they often received unimaginable treatment from slave owners. Mothers were forced to separate from their children, women were sexually assaulted and frequently physical abused by slave owners, and girls were forced into taking care of their master's children at a young age, all of which likely made some women feel that dying was easier than living as a slave. The other two spirituals included speak about a promise land and they encouraged journeying to that promise land, which could either be interpreted as a place connected to religion or as a reference to the Underground Railroad.

7. Shout Sister Shout – Sister Rosetta Tharpe (voice)

Born in Arkansas in 1915, Rosetta Tharpe began her career by touring with her mother. She moved to Chicago and was exposed to jazz and blues but became famous while performing gospel songs on her guitar and touring with her partner Marie Knight. She is considered one of the first musicians to mix gospel with rock and roll music and was named “the Godmother of rock and roll” by NPR. This song is much more upbeat than most of the songs discussed previously and presents a similarly more uplifting and empowering message for female listeners. As the title suggests, “Shout Sister Shout” urges women to be vocal about their opinions and to not let men treat them unequally or leave them without reason. Additionally, she sings that “there ain’t no reason why a man’s so simple”, questioning why men are “simple” and predictable in their actions towards women. There are also clear themes of sisterhood and understanding other women’s hardships expressed in the lyrics, which were vital to the social progress made by black women at the time, since white people wouldn’t listen to their individual opinions and calls to action in most cases.

8. ‘t Ain’t Nobody’s Business If I Do – Bessie Smith (voice)

Bessie Smith, another talented black queer blues singer, lived in poverty during her childhood and started singing as a street performer, catching the attention of audiences with her vocal skills. She signed with Columbia Records in 1923 and was brought to national attention after releasing her first single. During her life, she was very open about her sexuality and sang frequently about issues in the black community. Smith’s “‘t Ain’t Nobody’s Business If I Do” is another song about women’s empowerment and has a very similar message to “Shout Sister Shout”. In this song, she makes the point that women will always be criticized no matter how they act, so they should do whatever feels right to them and it should be nobody’s business but their own. For example, she sings that “If I go to church on Sunday / Sing the shimmy down on Monday / Ain’t nobody’s business if I do”, telling us that it shouldn’t matter what a woman does with her time and rejecting the idea that some activities aren’t meant for women or that women aren’t feminine enough if they do stereotypically masculine things. Since Bessie was also openly queer, she could have sung this as a message to straight people that they shouldn’t criticize queer people for what they do in their private time.

Conclusion

These eight songs illustrate how music allowed black women and queer people in the 19th and 20th centuries to share their feelings with others and comment on the social climate at the time. They also show what values and ideas were important to these women and the various ways in which they coped with the issues they dealt with. Most importantly, though, the lyrics and emotions behind empowering, relatable songs like these gave African Americans hope for a better future, which would have been especially significant to those facing additional discrimination due to their gender or sexuality.

Sources

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