A Home Before Heaven: Belief, Worship, and Community in a Southern Gospel Sing Service

Jason T. McCoy
THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF MUSIC

A HOME BEFORE HEAVEN:
BELIEF, WORSHIP, AND COMMUNITY
IN A SOUTHERN GOSPEL SING SERVICE

By

JASON T. MCCOY

A Thesis submitted to the
College of Music
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Music

Degree Awarded:
Fall Semester, 2007

Copyright © 2007
Jason McCoy
All Rights Reserved
The members of the Committee approve the thesis of Jason McCoy defended on November 8, 2007.

Benjamin Koen  
Professor Directing Thesis

Michael Bakan  
Committee Member

Amanda Porterfield  
Outside Committee Member

The Office of Graduate Studies has verified and approved the named committee members.
Completion of this thesis would hardly have been possible without the support and encouragement of a number of friends, colleagues, and family members. I owe them a great debt of gratitude. With the warmest of hearts, I thank my friends at Brotherly Love Ministries, especially Bill and Teresa, for embracing me unto themselves and their community. I also thank the members of the musicology faculty at Florida State University for nurturing, shaping, and guiding my intellectual interests. In this regard, I especially thank the members of my thesis committee, Benjamin Koen, Michael Bakan, and Amanda Porterfield, for their insightful advice and patient direction. This thesis represents the beginnings of my scholarly career, and as such, I will always be proud to have had such remarkable and distinguished scholars involved in it. Finally, I must thank my family, especially my wife, Kristin, for her constant love throughout this process. Truly (for better or worse!) she has enabled me to take on the fascinating life of a scholar.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**LIST OF FIGURES** ....................................................................................... vi

**ABSTRACT** ............................................................................................... vii

**CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION** ................................................................. 1
  Thesis Statement ....................................................................................... 4
  Broader Significance of Thesis ................................................................. 5
  Theoretical Approach .............................................................................. 6
  Salvationist Belief and the Ontology of Liminality .............................. 6
  Communitas and the Gospel Sing ............................................................ 8
  Celebration and Self-Efficacy ................................................................. 9
  **Background Information and Review of Literature** ......................... 9
  Holiness-Pentecostal Movement ............................................................ 10
  Southern Gospel Music ........................................................................ 11
  Critique of Scholarship on Southern Gospel ....................................... 13
  **Methodology** ....................................................................................... 16
  Fieldwork and Ethnographic Approaches ............................................ 16
  Ethical Issues ......................................................................................... 17
  Phenomenology and Methodology ....................................................... 20
  **Structure of the Thesis** ................................................................. 23

**CHAPTER 2: ETHNOGRAPHY** ................................................................. 25
  Environmental and Sociological Context ............................................. 25
  Initial Encounter with Brotherly Love Ministries ................................ 26
  Ralph’s Story ......................................................................................... 35
  Creating Brotherly Love Ministries ...................................................... 43
  Bill’s Musical Testimony ...................................................................... 53

**CHAPTER 3: ANALYSIS** ...................................................................... 58
Liminality and the Gospel Sing ....................................................... 58
Communitas and the Gospel Sing .................................................. 61
Self-Empowerment through the Creation of Celebration ............... 65
Conclusion ............................................................................... 67

REFERENCES .................................................................................. 69
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH ............................................................. 73
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Map of Brotherly Love Ministries……………………………………..28

Figure 2: Teresa and Ralph perform……………………………………………..45

Figure 3: Performance Area……………………………………………………...46

Figure 4: Participants listen to a performance……………………………………49

Figure 5: Bill practices before his performance…………………………………54
ABSTRACT

This thesis presents an ethnomusicological study of Brotherly Love Ministries’ Gospel Sing service, focusing on the interrelated dynamics of salvationist belief, familial community, and worship rooted in individual musical performance. Demonstrating that the Gospel Sing holds special attraction for individuals whose life histories are marked by an experience of social marginalization, I emphasize the potentiality of the Gospel Sing to promote a sense of inherent value in participants who have, in large measure, lost their sense of value. Further to this line of thinking is the idea that the primary function of the Gospel Sing is to validate participants’ belief in salvation by creating an experience of celebration, which I define simply as the embodiment of joy. Such celebratory experience is created through devaluing standards of performance and promoting individual musical creativity, in whatever stages it may be, as a highly valued activity. In this manner of creating celebratory experience, the Gospel Sing cultivates an overall sense of self-worth and well being that serves to strengthen self-efficacy beliefs in the face of life’s difficulties. It provides participants an opportunity to create for themselves their own joy, thus allowing them to recuperate a sense of control over the quality of their lives.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

But this is the hope that we have; an’ for me, it’s not even a hope anymore—it’s a reality. I know that it’s there. My hope is that the Lord’l keep his guidin’ hand on me, an’ I can stay in line good enough to make it. ‘Cause the Devil’s at every corner. That’s why we singin’. Me ‘n Katie was singin’ that song on the way down here—“Stand Toe to Toe with the Devil.” I said, “My Lord, he has been on me, not just tonight, but I mean to day, really, extra hard.” But I know that one day, ol’ Satan, we gonna’ be in a place where he can’t get to us. Right now he can still get to us, because he can punch them buttons, you know? An’ if he can’t get to you, he’ll use somebody else an’ work through them. An’ it’s usually your loved ones—somebody you care very much about.

—Ralph Griffin, Brotherly Love Ministries, Crawfordville, Florida, March 4, 2006

Countless churches speckle the seemingly impenetrable forests of slash pines, cypresses, dogwoods, and oaks that blanket the northern Gulf Coast regions of the Southeastern United States. Some are so shrouded by the thicket that the only evidence of their existence offered to the casual passerby is a rusty, hand-painted sign along the road displaying a name such as Miracle Deliverance Center, Church of the Living Word Tabernacle, or Bethel Temple First Born Church.¹ Some look like churches. Others appear to be homes, trailers, warehouses, and storefronts appropriated from the secular world and transformed into sacred spaces. Some have

¹ Each of these churches can be found along a five mile stretch of Highway 61 in Wakulla County, Florida, close to the site of my fieldwork.
denominational or sectarian affiliations, especially with the Holiness-Pentecostal and Primitive Baptist churches. Others have chosen to go it alone, cutting all ties to the bureaucratic and doctrinal fetters of such ecclesiastical institutions. Each has been founded by people, almost always men, who desire to consummate their vision of an idealized worshiping community, one that is sequestered from what they perceive to be the theological misdirection of much of Christiandom and the ideological oblivion of secular society, a community that instead believes and behaves in accordance with an interpretation of the Bible that they believe is definitive.

One such church is Brotherly Love Ministries, founded by Ralph Griffin in March 2001 with the help of his wife, Teresa. Located in Crawfordville, Florida, a small, rural town about 15 miles south of Tallahassee, it occupies a former karate studio situated behind a deteriorating strip mall that runs along the town’s main road. A bright red and white sign on the corner eave of the strip mall announces: “Gospel Sing, Saturday Evenings, 7:00.” An arrow points toward the white cinderblock building out back, where upon entering through the aluminum doors, one encounters an open, spacious room wanly lit by fluorescent lighting. Toward the front rests a pulpit surrounded by microphones, acoustic and electric guitars, electric bass, keyboard, amplifiers, speakers, and mixing consoles. Cushioned chairs, arranged in several pew-like rows, face the pulpit. It seems to be an area designated for worship. Behind the last row of chairs, however, is another area that seems more representative of home. Tables and folding chairs are scattered about, framed by sofas and loungers. A small kitchen, with refrigerator, stove, and sink, occupies a back corner. Extending along a wall is a long table on top of which lays a scrumptious feast of classic Southern cooking: chicken and dumplings, butter beans, ham, cole slaw, red velvet cake, sweet tea, and soda pop.

About a dozen people mingle about the room. Bill and Carl sit near the pulpit, casually strumming their guitars and fiddling with their amplifiers while exchanging humorous self-effacing remarks about their supposed lack of musical talent. Sister Lucy sits near the kitchen, chatting with Old Brother Osmond about the weather. Teresa carries in more food, all the while shooing away her 7-year-old grandson, Tyson. His big sister, 16-year-old Kaylee, lazes on a sofa and doodles. Five or six others are spread about, tuning instruments, conversing, or sitting alone in silence. Ralph, who has been standing just outside the door, takes a final drag from a cigarette before entering and signaling everyone to gather for prayer.
They stand in a circle and reach for one another’s hands, as they share their concerns and ask for prayer. After prayer, they eat. No recompense is required for the food, for it is offered freely to all who come. When they are finished eating, Ralph, Teresa, Bill, and Carl make their way to the pulpit area, pick up their instruments, and begin a time of musical worship. Their songs come mostly from the Southern and Country Gospel repertoire—“I’ll Fly Away,” “God of the Mountain,” “Three Rusty Nails,” “A Little Talk with Jesus”; songs made famous in the early and mid-20th century by such country and western stars as The Carter Family, Hank Williams, George Jones, Merle Haggard, Tammy Wynette, Johnny Cash, and Willie Nelson; songs that are today rarely heard in America’s houses of worship, that is, if they ever were, for these are songs that occupy a place of some controversy within the history of American evangelical Protestant worship. Anchored to their secular moorings by their rockabilly sound and their association with superstar musicians who seemed always to be embattled with booze, drugs, infidelity, and crime, they were considered inappropriate for “dignified” worship. Yet many of the Gospel Sing participants would, in fact, refer to themselves as former alcoholics, drug addicts, womanizers, and criminals, and as such, they intimately identify with these songs. In a sense, these songs rhetorically communicate the dramatic narratives of their lives.

As the musicians perform, the other participants position themselves about the room wherever they feel most comfortable, singing, clapping, shouting exhortations (“Amen! Hallelujah! Yes Lord!”), or, perhaps, simply listening in reflective stillness. After several songs, Ralph delivers a sermon, the content of which emphasizes salvation, heaven, the necessity for obedience to God through the submission to the absolute authority of the Bible, and the personal transformation that results from this. At times, he accentuates the Second Coming of Christ, weaving a complex mesh of scripture verses in support of a dispensational Pre-millennialist theology. His constant theme is that “you must be ready,” charging that Satan is always

---

2 “Southern” and “Country” gospel do not necessarily denote separate genres; rather, these terms are used more or less interchangeably to denote a body of popular religious songs that developed out of a combination of 19th-century American gospel hymnody, Afro-American spirituals, and early and mid-20th century gospel songs that were mass mediated and disseminated by the burgeoning music and radio industry starting in the 1920’s. “Country” and “southern” gospel refer somewhat generally to a difference in style and instrumentation, with “country” reflecting more of a country and western style, and “southern” reflecting more the quartet-driven styles of the singing schools. Brotherly Love Ministries exhibits the “country” style, though again, the terms are not in strict usage. I use the term “Southern Gospel” because it seems to be in more common usage.

3 Dispensationalism is the belief that certain Biblical prophecies correspond with current and past global events, evidencing the validity of the Bible as factual truth and proof for the imminence of Christ’s return. Pre-millennialism is the belief that Christ will return in human form to rule the earth for a thousand years. The thousand
working to reclaim the Christian soul for his own, and “the world,” long since given over to Satan’s control, is a dangerous place, full of temptations that may seem innocuous at first, but are ultimately and eternally fatal.

When Ralph finishes, the music recommences. Participants are urged to come forward and share their favorite songs while accompanied by Ralph, Bill, Carl, and whoever else is capable and willing. This is the Gospel Sing proper, a time when participants can reflect upon their personal faith and perform songs that embody that faith. By choosing songs and patterning them in a certain performative sequence, participants effectively mythologize their own lives, giving them a sense of substance and voice. Thus, by casting their lives in such narrativistic and symbolic terms, they are able to reconstruct their lives, and create for themselves a new sense of meaning and control.

The service lasts until ten or eleven o’clock at night, depending on how the spirit moves and takes shape throughout the evening. When energy finally falters and fatigue sets in, the participants gather outside, kindled around the glow of their cigarettes, to share their renewed lives with one another for just a little while longer before returning to “the world.”

**Thesis Statement**

This thesis presents an ethnomusicological study of Brotherly Love Ministries’ Gospel Sing. I show that this is a “musicultural community” (see for example, Bakan 2007: 10) in which a combined emphasis on salvationist belief and highly participatory musical worship enable participants to lead more fulfilling lives, both individually and collectively. Drawing on Victor Turner’s concept of liminality (further discussed in pp. 7-9), I focus on the ontological effects of participants’ salvationist belief upon personal and social experience, showing that such belief engenders a sense of disengagement and freedom from “ordinary society”—analogous to what Turner refers to as social structure and to what the participants refer to as “the world”—and thus a sense of new possibilities for living. Through the key religious experience of the Gospel Sing, the dynamic potentialities latent within the self are engaged and brought to the fore of years will be marked by a time of global peace. At its conclusion, Armageddon will ensue, and the world will be destroyed in a cosmic battle between Christ and Satan. Adherents of this theological perspective often cite Revelation 20 to support their view.
participants’ lived experience. This dynamic of drawing from within the capacities and potentialities that lead to life benefits is informed by Albert Bandura’s formulation of the concept of self-efficacy, which he defines as “people’s beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives” (Bandura 1994: 71). Not coincidentally, the Gospel Sing holds special attraction for those individuals whose life histories have been marked by an experience of social marginalization, due, in most cases, to some combination of poverty, substance abuse, and health problems.

Where other social institutions, most notably the local religious community, failed to help these individuals overcome their difficulties, the Gospel Sing, in their view, has been more successful. The reason for this, in concise terms, is that the Gospel Sing promotes a sense of inherent value in participants who have, in large measure, lost their sense of value. Further to this line of thinking is the idea that the primary function of the Gospel Sing is to validate participants’ belief in salvation by creating an experience of celebration, which I define here simply as the embodiment of joy. Such celebratory experience is created through devaluing standards of performance and promoting individual musical creativity, in whatever stages it may be, as a highly valued activity. In this manner of creating celebratory experience, the Gospel Sing cultivates an overall sense of self-worth and well being that serves to strengthen self-efficacy beliefs in the face of life’s difficulties.

**Broader Significance of the Thesis**

In both its subject matter and approach, this thesis offers an original contribution to the study of religion and music in ethnomusicology. Among current scholarship on Southern Gospel music, it is distinct for its fieldwork-based, ethnomusicological approach. As such, the focus is less on exploring meaning embedded in the particularities of Southern Gospel music as a genre as it is in exploring meaning expressed by a particular Christian community through the performance of Southern Gospel music. Additionally, this thesis is among the few ethnomusicological studies to specifically address musical processes in what Donald E. Miller terms “new paradigm churches” (Miller 1997). Miller argues that Christianity in the United States is in the midst of a second reformation, in which centralized, denominational power is
ebbing and being replaced by the emergence of independent, local church communities who appeal to various specific demographic populations. Rooted in the values of the 1960s countercultural movement, new paradigm churches respond to “therapeutic, individualistic, and anti-establishment themes” (Miller 1997: 21). He further distinguishes twelve characteristics of these churches: 1) they were started after the mid-1960s; 2) the majority of the congregants were born after 1945; 3) seminary training is not a requisite for clerical leadership; 4) worship is contemporary; 5) lay leadership is strongly encouraged; 6) they have extensive small group ministries; 7) clergy and congregants usually dress informally; 8) tolerance of different personal styles is prized; 9) pastors tend to be understated, humble, and self-revealing; 10) bodily, rather than cognitive, participation in worship is the norm; 11) the “gifts of the Holy Spirit” are affirmed; and 12) Bible-centered teaching predominates over topical sermonizing (Miller 1997: 20). Note that a certain theological orientation—whether it be “liberal,” “conservative,” or “fundamentalist”—is absent from this list. Instead, what characterizes “new paradigm churches” is a breach with denominational establishmentarianism combined with an emphasis on individual experience and everyday living. According to these criteria, Brotherly Love Ministries may be categorized as a new paradigm church. The themes explored here thus have wider application to other church movements that, though they may support different doctrinal claims and exhibit different styles of worship, nevertheless share similar underlying psycho-social dynamics.

**Theoretical Approach**

This thesis is strongly informed by Victor Turner’s concepts of liminality and communitas. In the following section, I will show how I apply these concepts to an elucidation of the Gospel Sing service at Brotherly Love Ministries.

**Salvationist Belief and the Ontology of Liminality**

For the Gospel Sing participants, salvation means that they will enter heaven after physical death, entailing a state of ultimate union with God whereby they are able to enjoy infinite and eternal pleasure. Attaining salvation is regarded as the singular purpose of life, the goal towards which all of life’s efforts must be ever directed, and it is far from unconditional.
God is alternatively viewed as loving, wrathful, or even hateful toward individuals, depending upon their beliefs and behaviors. In order to enter heaven, the Gospel Sing participants believe that, at the moment of physical death, they must be regarded by God with loving approval. Because the primary purpose is to “get into heaven,” all other purposes—raising a family, getting a job, fostering friendships, and so on—are viewed as secondary to it and are valued and critiqued on the basis of how they support the goal of “getting into heaven.” For instance, they believe they need to distance themselves from people or situations that represent a threat to their salvation.

The Gospel Sing participants thus experience their lives as pervasively liminal. They view themselves as separate from ordinary society, as ordinary society under their salvationist belief is transformed into an existential battlefield in which they must prove their worthiness to God. While liminality was first employed by Arnold van Gennep to describe an intermediary phase of rites of passage (Gennep 1909), Victor Turner greatly developed and popularized the concept within the social sciences. He defined liminality as “the state of being in between successive participations in social milieux dominated by social structural considerations, whether formalized or unformalized…The intervening liminal period or phase is thus betwixt and between the categories of ordinary social life” (Turner 1974: 52-53). Liminality is marked by several features, chief among them a sense of separation from ordinary society and a sense of unity, equality, and intimacy among those within the same liminal experience, which Turner refers to as communitas. Thus, the concept of liminality applies not only to the structural mechanics of a rite of passage, but also to the ontological transformation experienced by its participants (Turner 1967: 101-102).

In its ontological capacity, the concept of liminality begins to shed light on the inner lives of the Gospel Sing participants. Whereas Turner applied liminality to a certain state within a ritual context, I apply the ontological characteristics of liminality to the everyday lifeworlds of the Gospel Sing participants.4 They experienced themselves in a state between this world and the next. They believed that ordinary society was corrupt and wicked and so experienced a necessary detachment and removal from it, viewing themselves as “saved,” while others were “damned.” Nevertheless, they understood that they could not be totally removed from ordinary

society until their deaths. They were still forced to negotiate society, doing so with an awareness of the danger it posed to their salvation.

Communitas and the Gospel Sing

The Gospel Sing represented an encapsulation of the ontological liminality experienced by its participants, serving as a place of anti-structure in that there was dissolution of hierarchical social statuses and the ways of relating that such hierarchies entail. Bobby C. Alexander remarks that “Pentecostal possession offers concrete opposition to social structure by suspending some of the requirements of everyday social norms when it removes participants from social structure by way of ritual liminality; it also creates structural ambiguity as well as direct and egalitarian social arrangements in ritual communitas. Ritual possession poses its greatest opposition to the dominant social structure by introducing into everyday life the alternative, communitarian relations that are generated in ritual liminality, if only on a temporary basis” (Alexander 1991: 35).

While Alexander refers to a psycho-spiritual state of possession as the impetus for communitas, the Gospel Sing, with its emphasis on creating an experience of celebration, similarly resists social structure by promoting an environment of equality, freedom, closeness, and acceptance among participants as a context for musical performance.

Ralph Griffin founded Brotherly Love Ministries in an attempt to realize an idealized worshiping community, one where participants viewed each other and themselves as social equals, mere fellow travelers on their journeys to heaven. This sense of community was fostered by the opportunity the Gospel Sing format provided to individual participants for the locutionary self-expression of belief through prayer, oral testimony, fellowship, and, most significantly, musical performance. However, while the participants expressed the desire for an open, nonjudgmental, accepting community, the realization of such was, in fact, frustrated by their insistence on a specific interpretation of the Bible and a correspondingly rigid and exclusionary worldview that divided people into the categories of “saved” and “unsaved.” Those who diverged from this view were implicitly prevented from full communal participation, for they threatened one of the critical factors that promoted communitas—a shared salvationist belief. According to Ralph, the number of participants declined from the time of Brotherly Love Ministry’s inception in 2001, from approximately forty to fifty regular participants to less than
half that number. Many of the remaining participants reflexively theorized on the reasons for this decline, invoking scripture as further affirmation of their beliefs, which they believed signified their status as being “truly saved” in comparison to those who had “fallen away” or were never truly saved in the first place. Intimacy developed among the remaining participants, reinforcing this belief, and their small numbers actually became a necessary factor in promoting communitas.

**Celebration and Self-Efficacy**

As confirmation of their salvation, participants sought an experience of celebration, which they attributed to the indwelling of the “Holy Spirit.” However, this entailed a circular process, for they could not celebrate unless they “knew” they were saved, yet they could not “know” if they were saved unless they could celebrate. Celebration, therefore, needed to be evoked through worship. The yearning for an experience of celebration thus directed worship, providing participants with a tangible, emotional apex towards which to strive. Of significance, though, is that the Gospel Sing was built on the premise of giving an opportunity to individual participants to select and perform songs for themselves. Therefore, participants had a high degree of individual agency in creating an experience of celebration. In my view, this is where the power of the Gospel Sing resided. By restoring a sense of agency to participants who, in many respects, felt powerless in other aspects of their everyday lives, they recovered a sense of self-worth and self-direction. They discovered that they could create joy for themselves, enhancing self-efficacy beliefs about their ability to control the quality of their lives.

**Background Information and Review of Literature**

While the musical component of Brotherly Love Ministries was rooted in the tradition of Southern Gospel, its theological component was rooted in the Pentecostal-Holiness movement. In the following review of literature, I will give an overview of these two topics and their relationship to the Gospel Sing.
**Holiness-Pentecostal Movement**

Pentecostalism has recently emerged as target of a growing body of scholarly literature (see, for example Coleman 2000; Shaull and Cesar 2000; Wacker 2001; Jenkins 2006 and 2007; Anderson 2007; and Cartledge 2007). For the purposes of this thesis, I found Vinson Synan’s *The Holiness-Pentecostal Tradition: Charismatic Movements in the Twentieth Century* (1971, 1997) to be useful for its overview of the historical lineage of the Holiness-Pentecostal movement in which he articulates important points of belief and modalities of religiosity that developed throughout the late 19th century and into the present.

Two theological issues discussed by Synan are especially relevant to this thesis in that they mark areas of contestation between Pentecostalists and much of the mainline Protestant establishment. One issue has to do with historically divergent views of salvation. Many Protestants—Baptists, in particular—have promoted a belief colloquially described as “once saved, always saved.” In other words, they believed that once people converted to Christianity, their salvation was sealed no matter what they may do with the remainder of their lives. Many Pentecostalists have sharply disagreed with this, believing instead that conversion merely initiated salvation but was guaranteed only by remaining active in faith throughout one’s life. Though they allowed for people to “fall away,” such “backsliders” needed to rededicate themselves to faith in order to be saved. Those not “in the fold” at the moment of physical death were doomed to hell (see also Graves 2004: 15-16). In Wakulla County, Pentecostal-Holiness and Baptist churches are the two most prominent religious institutions, resulting in some degree of friction among their members.

Another divisive issue directly relevant to the founding of Brotherly Love Ministries is known as the “Jesus only” or “pentecostal unitarian” question (Synan 1997: 156-60). This issue arose within the Holiness-Pentecostal movement itself and concerned the words a pastor should choose when baptizing a new convert. Pastors had often invoked the Holy Trinity, baptizing “in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.” Various factions questioned the Biblical basis for this, arguing instead that converts needed to be baptized “in the name of Jesus.” The “Jesus only” camp cited various scriptures such as Acts 2:38 (“Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and

---

5 It should be noted that Pentecostalism does not refer to a specific denomination such as “Southern Baptist” or “United Methodist.” Rather, it refers to a broad range of churches that adopt the label in order to associate themselves with other churches that share similar beliefs and religious experiences.

6 Mainline Protestantism includes the various Baptist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, and more recently, Methodist denominations, but excludes the Anglican and Episcopalian denominations.
be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the Holy Ghost”) and 1 Corinthians 6:11 (‘‘…but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God’’). The “trinitarians” cited Matthew 28:19, commonly known as the Great Commission (“Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost”). This division was one of the primary reasons Ralph, a staunch “Jesus first” adherent, broke away from his Pentecostal church and started Brotherly Love Ministries.

Southern Gospel Music

I must confess to some measure of frustration in my search for scholarly materials specifically relating to Southern Gospel music.\textsuperscript{7} While there is a substantial body of literature on what is commonly termed “black gospel” (see, for example Heilbut 1971; Walker 1979; Burnim 1985, 1988, and 2001; Reagon 1992 and 2001; Young 1997; and Jackson 2004), the literature on Southern Gospel is comparatively scant. Furthermore, in what does exist, there is little substantive theoretical analysis. This is not to necessarily disparage the extant body of literature (though much of it is extremely problematic), but rather to point out the fertility of the area for further work.\textsuperscript{8}

A few works that do specifically contribute to the scholarly discourse on the history of Southern Gospel include Don Cusic’s \textit{The Sound of Light: A History of Gospel and Christian Music} (1990), which offers a good deal of historical information but concentrates heavily on the embryonic stages of Protestant worship music between the 16\textsuperscript{th} and 19\textsuperscript{th} century. Bob Terrell’s \textit{The Music Men: The Story of Professional Gospel Quartet Singing} (1990, 2000) is largely devoid of any critical theoretical material. Its value instead lies in the many stories and

\textsuperscript{7} One reason for this imbalance may be explained by James Goff, Jr., who writes: “It is an indictment of American history that black and white gospel developed as separate—and parallel—traditions. A sense of injustice no doubt led many scholars to investigate first the considerable accomplishments of black gospel songwriters and artists. Another reason is perhaps because, though gospel music generated a greater volume of sales among the larger white population, in segregated America, gospel music provided only a small component of the overall musical market for white America while it played a much larger role in the black community” (Goff 2002: 2).

\textsuperscript{8} As a quick example of this, there is no specific mention of Southern Gospel in the recently published \textit{Garland Encyclopedia of World Music: The United States and Canada}, considered to be an exhaustive and comprehensive source of data for the musics of the world, including all manner of popular musics—religious or otherwise—found in the United States. The article titled “Religious Music” (Burnim 2001) addresses only sacred music associated with the “black experience.”
interviews Terrell conducted with influential artists, providing a quantity of secondhand ethnographic material for scholars.

I found a more valuable source of information in James Goff, Jr.’s *Close Harmony: A History of Southern Gospel* (2002), due especially to its emphasis on the development of Southern Gospel in the mid to late 20th century. He discusses “Southern Gospel” as an institutional term used to denote a certain brand of music, carrying with it religious, geographical, sociocultural, and racial overtones. Up until the early 1980’s, various styles of popular Christian musics in the United States were consolidated under the umbrella term “gospel music.” There were, of course, various styles and sub-genres within gospel music, including the somewhat fuzzy distinction between “black” and “white gospel,” but by and large, they were heaped together within the greater marketplace. The Gospel Music Association (GMA) was founded in 1964 in Nashville, Tennessee in order to promote and market gospel music, establish a Gospel Hall of Fame, and issue the Dove Awards for Christian artists of all popular styles and genres (similar to the Grammy Awards). Soon after the GMA was founded, however, discord and resentment began to fester between Christian artists who stylistically mirrored secular popular music and those who wished to retain the stylistic and rhetorical conventions they felt had long been established as tradition with the “white gospel” world. This “tradition” referred to mostly quartet-style singing of a gospel repertoire dating back to the late 19th and early 20th century, though it also included newly composed songs of similar stylistic and rhetorical content. Traditionalists outwardly professed that the most important attribute for a gospel song was that it centered on evangelical lyrics that emphasized sin, salvation, Christ’s death and resurrection, and heaven. Many contemporizing artists focused instead on social issues and person-centered affects, but whether or not they included the “Gospel message” in their lyrics, they were resented as they began to greatly eclipse the traditionalists in terms of popularity, sales, and influence within the GMA. In 1982, the traditionalists broke off to form the Southern Gospel Music Association (SGMA) in Albany, Georgia. “Southern Gospel” was entrenched as a term to denote “traditional” gospel music, geographically and culturally equating it with values believed to be associated with the Bible Belt region of the United States— that is, the South. Goff cites Jerry Kirskey, longtime editor of the SGMA’s newsletter, *Singing News*, as writing in 1995:
Promoters of this so-called market expansion [of contemporary popular Christian music] have duped many good groups, record labels, radio stations and other entities in our industry into playing down the Gospel in order to reach new markets. If we play down the Gospel, we have no reason to reach broader markets because it was the Gospel we wanted to reach these people with in the first place…Southern Gospel is not just four guys singing four-part harmony. Southern Gospel is any style of music sung by any number of people. What makes it Southern Gospel is not the style and not the number of people; it is that the lyrics contain the Gospel of Jesus Christ. What makes it Southern Gospel is a message as bold as the messages written by the apostle Paul, proclaiming Jesus Christ is Lord, Jesus Christ is Salvation, Jesus Christ is the way, the only way. No one comes unto the Father except through Jesus (Goff 2002: 281-82).

Kirskey’s forceful evangelistic zeal echoed the sentiments of legions of evangelical Christians, both in the United States and across the world, who shared a similarly exclusionary perspective of their religion. This number especially ballooned in the 1980’s and 1990’s due to many factors, significant among them being the climax of the Cold War and the sense of nationalism that developed in the U.S.’s apparent victory over communism, which in turn implied Christianity’s victory over atheism. Southern Gospel, in kind, enjoyed paralleling popularity in the mid-1990’s culminating with the whopping success at home and abroad of the *Gaither Homecoming* video series (1996), which sold well into the millions.

**Critique of Scholarship on Southern Gospel**

While most scholarship on Southern Gospel music could be described as positivist, historical narrative, a few works represent attempts at more formal critical analyses. Sandra Sizer’s *Gospel Hymns and Social Religion: the Rhetoric of Nineteenth-Century Revivalism* (1978), while devoid of any ethnographic material, offers a critical analysis of the text of 19th-century gospel hymnody, much of which has been “canonized” within the Southern Gospel repertoire. She makes the argument that gospel music acted as a feminizing force that domesticated the unruly passions of rural, working class American men of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Rather than cast the effects of gospel music in terms of gender, I instead think of it in broader terms of psychological transformation. Such transformation is critical to the efficacy of the Gospel Sing.
A more recent critical approach to Southern Gospel is found in *More than “Precious Memories”: The Rhetoric of Southern Gospel Music* (2004), edited by Michael P. Graves and David Fillingim. It contains a collection of essays, very few of which rely on fieldwork and ethnography, concentrating instead on song texts. A general problematic issue with the volume (as well as others that focus primarily on rhetoric outside of an ethnographic context or works whose ethnography is concerned mainly with Southern Gospel celebrities within a professional concert setting⁹) is that there is a tendency to promote an essentializing perspective of both the music and the people who make and experience it. Consider, for example, the following quote by Don Cusic in the books’ preface:

Southern Gospel embodies simple faith in a complex world. That is not to say it is a simple music; there is a complexity in the harmonies that creates beauty of sound. But the emotions and faith of Southern Gospel shun the complexities of life, opting instead for a clear, simple picture of life as it should be, ought to be, would be if the Jesus they know had his way. Audiences want to be comforted, consoled, encouraged, and surprised by the familiar; they do not want their faith challenged or attacked. They want their patriotism confirmed, their worldview affirmed, and their basic beliefs firmed up and strengthened. Singers demand the audience agree with them in matters of faith, and audiences in turn demand that singers articulate and capture that faith in songs.

Southern Gospel Music is a Norman Rockwell painting in song. It shows in clear, simple, straightforward terms the life of good, decent, ordinary folks, going about the world, doing God’s work. It is music to be sung to people who work hard, are dedicated to their church and family, love fried chicken, and earnestly want to go to heaven.

Such a perspective needs to be critically addressed, for the issue goes beyond the merely academic to the problem of how people are stereotyped and, in the process, marginalized. There is certainly nothing “simple” about the faith or the lives of the Gospel Sing participants. As well, we can only imagine the outcry—very well justified—if such recent words were to be applied to

---

⁹ For which the costs of tickets commonly run into the hundreds of dollars, especially for shows by The Gaithers. In a recent search for tickets to their upcoming shows, I could not find any tickets cheaper than $63. The great majority of them were between approximately $90 and $200. Apparently, “affirmation of a simple faith” comes with a high price tag.
“black gospel” and promoted as academic literature. Nevertheless, I include Cusic’s quote here because it is emblematic of what I have run up against in works that claim serious scholarship on this topic. For instance, Graves and Fillingim carelessly describes Southern Gospel as “music of folk whose religion is heartfelt and experiential” (Graves and Fillingim 2004: 17). Would this not pertain to devout adherents of any other faith tradition as well?

The rest of the essays are of uneven quality. Naaman K. Wood attempts to account for various resources and approaches and their potentialities regarding the study of Southern Gospel, noting that “there are four major camps or groups of writers that comprise popular music studies: pop music critics, cultural critics, musicologists, and communication studies critics” (p. 275). Woods privileges communication studies and cultural studies. Equating musicology with “tonal-structural analysis,” he dismisses musicology for its “highly exclusionary jargon” (p. 275). This presents a very limited perspective of musicology. Furthermore, he never cites of examples of “exclusionary jargon” to which he refers.

Fillingim’s essay, “A Flight from Liminality: ‘Home’ in Country and Gospel Music,” was particularly disappointing. I had hoped his discussion of liminality would prove to be highly relevant to my work. Instead, Fillingim locates liminality in “rednecks’…homelessness at the socioeconomic margins,” stating that “their uninvited ‘experience of the indeterminate, the decentered, and the transitional’—produces a longing for home that finds expression in redneck music” (p. 290). Of the many problems with this assessment, he assumes that socioeconomic and sociopolitical circumstances are the primary determinant cause of belief. He also contributes to the racializing of gospel music by stating, “In the spirituals and blues, the present is the place where one is moving (with or without God’s help) towards a better future. In country and Southern Gospel music, however, the present has more often been a marginal place in which one is simply stuck for the time-being” (p. 294). More helpful is Scott Tucker’s essay, “Looking for a City: The Rhetorical Vision of Heaven in Southern Gospel.” I especially appreciated his insightful comment that “a description [of heaven] is unique because all information is secondary. Heaven is not something that can be experienced and then described” (p.29). That an “experience of heaven” can be evoked through rhetorical description has important implications for the power of the Gospel Sing for enhancing self-efficacy beliefs.
Methodology

This thesis originated from an assignment for a fieldwork techniques class I took during the Spring 2006 semester. The genesis for my interest in this project, however, can be traced to my own religious upbringing. I grew up as the son of evangelical missionaries, and though I eventually moved away from the religious dictates of my past to adopt a more universalist and relativist perspective on religion, I still consider myself a devout Christian with an abiding interest in the vastly diverse ways Christianity manifests itself throughout various local communities, particularly as it is expressed and experienced through worship. Such an interest led not only to my interest in the Gospel Sing, but ultimately to my decision to pursue a career as an ethnomusicologist. Music is an integral component of Christian worship; for many, including the Gospel Sing participants, it is the most efficacious and cathartic means of worship. As such, ethnomusicology offers a rich palette of resources, analytical approaches, and methodological tools (especially its emphasis on fieldwork and ethnography) for studying worship experiences.

Fieldwork and Ethnographic Approaches

Two definitions of ethnomusicology stand as guiding principles for my work. Michael Bakan states that ethnomusicology is “the study of how music lives in the lives of people who make and experience it, and of how people live in the music they make” (Bakan 1999: 17-18). Similarly, Jeff Todd Titon defines ethnomusicology simply as “knowing people making music” (Titon 1997a: 257). Borrowing from these definitions, I could broadly define the premise of my thesis as a “study of how the Gospel Sing lives in the lives of the Gospel Sing participants, and of how the Gospel Sing participants live in the Gospel Sing”; and in order to do so, I have had to come to know, on some personal level, “the people making the music.”

Personal relationship-centered fieldwork, narrative ethnography, and reflexive theoretical analysis, then, comprise the methodological cornerstones for my work. From January to October 2006, I attended Saturday night services at Brotherly Love Ministries while employing fairly

---

10 I should qualify this by saying that I do not have an agenda of using ethnomusicological fieldwork or the profession itself as a means of Christian evangelism. Instead, my interest is of a personal nature—studying experiences of Christianity that both overlap and diverge from those with which I am more familiar and to which I am more connected within my own life experiences.

11 I would also clarify these definitions by drawing on Christopher Small’s concept of musicking: “to music is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing” (Small 1998: 9).
standard fieldwork practices, including jotting fieldnotes during and after services, transcribing oral histories gleaned from one-on-one interviews with participants, recording services with a portable digital audio recorder, and participating in the services as a fellow musician and Christian. Initially, I entered the field with no explicitly specific research agenda, at least none of which I was consciously aware. Armed with my curiosity, I sought to experience an unfamiliar manner of worship, allowing whatever issues of personal interest to arise out of that experience. In fact, this thesis initially began as an exploration of the relationship of Southern Gospel music to socio-economically marginalized Christians in the South, using Brotherly Love Ministries as a case study. Ultimately, however, such an agenda failed to address specific life issues more relevant to the Gospel Sing participants themselves. They certainly did not possess much, materially speaking, and regularly dealt with many difficulties associated with such poverty, yet in the face of it all, they seemed like genuinely happy people. I soon realized that it would be more honest to focus on what I understood through my fieldwork experience to be most representative, evocative, and deterministic of their worship experience: beliefs that stress salvation and the heavenly afterlife; highly participatory, self-processual, and celebratory worship; small, intimate community; and the holistic interrelatedness of all of these.

**Ethical Issues**

Over the last several decades, ethnographers have come to more fully accept responsibility for our presence within the field, both in how it impacts the people we study as well as in how this impact further influences the data we gather and the resultant conclusions. In relation to this, we have also come to face the limitations—sometimes even injustices—inherent in representing others through the constrictions of the written word. Finally, we have had to face the impact of our writing on our readers’ perceptions of the people we represent. We all (hopefully) seek to tell the truth as best we can, yet this carries a significant burden, especially as we realize that our writing may be, for some readers, the only source of information on a particular person, group of people, or cultural phenomenon.

A number of ethnographers have turned their attention to the ethical conundrums implicit in the normative fieldwork/ethnography/analysis model while prescribing means towards circumventing whatever unintended dishonesty and damage may potentially result from the
endeavor. Stephen Tyler, for example, famously critiques the whole enterprise of ethnography as representation (Tyler 1986), arguing instead in favor of an ethnography that is cooperatively constructed by both the scholar and the research subjects, and one that ultimately strives to “evoke” rather than “represent”:

The whole point of “evoking” rather than “representing” is that it frees ethnography from mimesis and the inappropriate mode of scientific rhetoric that entails “objects,” “facts,” “descriptions,” “inductions,” “generalizations,” “verification,” “experiment,” “truth,” and like concepts that, except as empty invocations, have no parallels either in the experience of ethnographic fieldwork or in the writing of ethnographies (Tyler 1986: 130).

Tyler criticizes nearly a century’s worth of ethnographic writing in which ethnographers, reflecting a scientific model, first cast the people they study in terms of “the other,” that is, as “subjects” whose discourse, behavior, and activities are to be observed, analyzed, and reported as given fact based on the presumption of the ethnographer’s detached, objective stance. Such a stance, of course, is untenable, nor even desirable in an enterprise that ethically demands, on at least some level, the fostering of authentically positive human relationships.

I agree in spirit with Tyler’s position, that ethnography should somehow strive to give the reader an experiential sense of the lifeworlds that are being explored. Still, I find his criticisms to be overreaching, mainly because his distinction between “evoking” and “representing” are too semantically problematic. I believe that representation cannot be avoided, nor should it necessarily be apologized for. Is there really an ethnography that somehow avoids representation?

The issue, of course, is that the written word will never allow for absolute accuracy as its reception is dependent on both the imaginative renderings of both writer and reader. Thus, the lifeworlds of the people we study and write about will always be somewhat skewed as they are channeled through our own interpretive lenses. Without further belaboring the point, my response to this problem, imperfect as it may be, is to write in a self-reflexive style with an

---

explicit self-awareness of my subjectivity.\textsuperscript{13} To further reinforce this point, when I specifically describe and analyze the Gospel Sing and its participants, I intentionally write in the past tense in order to make clear that lifeworlds are ever in flux and that my ethnography represents only my observations and experiences within a delimited span of time. In a sense, I view myself as writing very recent history.

Another problem is Tyler’s insistence on a “cooperatively evolved text” where scholars work closely with the people of their study in creating a text that is supposedly more fairly representative. Such an ideal is often impractical. In my case, the Gospel Sing participants were not highly interested in such an endeavor, and thus, there was little to no direct input on their part in writing this thesis. In this, I accept full responsibility for the control I wield in representing them while reiterating my awareness of my subjectivity. I should say, however, that the Gospel Sing participants undoubtedly enjoyed their role as my “research subjects,” and, perhaps more importantly, as my friends. I took on this project with their explicit, and enthusiastic, approval. They viewed me as a “Christian brother,” who, despite differences in belief, nevertheless enriched their time of worship. They also saw my work as an evangelistic opportunity for disseminating their beliefs and garnering appreciation for their way of worship.

To this end, it was important for me to act as participant-observer, a role that has become the norm for the current majority of ethnomusicologists (Myers 1992). However, within the context of worship, this was also potentially problematic. How does one genuinely participate in worship while remaining cognizant of one’s scholarly agenda? Moreover, how does one genuinely participate in worship when there is sometimes sharp disagreement with the beliefs that are being communally expressed in that worship? If one desists from participation, there is a strong risk of negatively impacting the worship experience for others, yet it seems somehow dishonest and insulting to merely fake it.

These are questions that I regularly struggled with, and indeed, I personally would not have taken on this project if I were not also a Christian. Yet, even with a broadly shared faith, I ran into profound differences in belief. Unless directly questioned, I chose to remain silent in such cases, my justification being that I was embedded in a faith community and wanted to do my part to ensure its integrity. And though some may disagree, I felt that I avoided dishonesty

\textsuperscript{13} Such a reflexive approach has been applied by many ethnomusicologists over the last several years to the point where it is now a rather conventional means to writing ethnography. See, for example Titon 1988, Berliner 1993, Rice 1994, Barz and Cooley 1997, Bakan 1999, Kisliuk 2000, and Levin 2006.
because I genuinely did “believe” most of the rhetorical content of the music, even if I likely had a very different, and unvoiced, interpretation than the other participants. I was therefore proactive in my participation, often coming forward to offer my own selection of songs, singing both soloistically and in small ensembles with other participants. For example, I especially enjoyed supplying vocal harmony when singing duets with one participant named Bonnie. I liked to think of these moments as a musical symbol of my place within the community.

Recalling Stephen Feld’s theory of “sound structure as social structure” (Feld 1984), my social station was as an outside member, someone who inhabited a rather different lifeworld, but a member nonetheless who positively enriched and colored the worship experience for the other participants.

**Phenomenology and Methodology**

This thesis takes a phenomenological approach to the study of the Gospel Sing. Phenomenology broadly refers to the study of human experience, or somewhat more specifically, how “experience is made known to consciousness” (Stewart and Mickunas 1990: 91). As an important philosophical orientation, phenomenology has experienced a wide range of treatments in the hands of various scholars. Indeed, perhaps one of the most exciting attributes of phenomenology is its elasticity; it articulates concepts that can be formed, reformed, and applied in a host of ways in accordance with the needs and creative limits of the scholar. An extensive, yet accessible, overview of the major phenomenological concepts and orientations is provided by Michael Jackson in his introduction to *Things As They Are: New Directions in Phenomenological Anthropology* (1996), a diverse collection of phenomenologically grounded explorations of social and cultural phenomena. From this, I have drawn out two critical themes for my work. The first is the emphasis on lifeworld, defined by Jackson as “that domain of everyday, immediate social existence and practical activity, with all its habituality, its crises, its vernacular and idiomatic character, its biographical particularities, its decisive events and indecisive strategies, which theoretical knowledge addresses but does not determine, from which conceptual understanding arises but on which it does not primarily depend” (Jackson 1996: 7-8). I expand upon Jackson’s definition, however, by also including in the lifeworld all that a person

---

14 For an two extensive overviews of various phenomenological approaches, see Stewart and Mickunas 1990 and Sokolowski 1999.
believes to exist within their social reality and therefore experientially addresses on some level. The second critical theme I draw from phenomenology is an emphasis on ontological effect, rather than cause, in regards to belief: “The phenomenologist suspends inquiry into the hidden determinants of belief and action in order to describe the implications, intentions, and effects of what people say, do, and hold to be true” (Jackson 1996: 11).

Phenomenology, then, is greatly concerned with methodological approaches. Two phenomenologically grounded scholars who have influenced the methodological orientation of my thesis are Jeff Todd Titon and Lila Abu-Lughod. Titon states that “[Phenomenology], an alternative to Anglo-American positivism and to European structuralism, involves mainly two kinds of activities: phenomenology and hermeneutics. Phenomenology emphasizes the immediate, concrete, sensory lifeworld, and it attempts to ground knowledge in the world of lived experience” (Titon 1997b: 90). Where I differ from Titon is that an emphasis on “the immediate, concrete, and sensory” only partially informs us of “the world of lived experience,” and, indeed, can sometimes diminish it. I tend to emphasize the ontological, basing my evaluations on how people personally describe their lives to me and then observing the same people in social action. Many phenomenologists tend to do the same, including, at times, Titon (leading me more to question his terminology than his actual approach). In *Powerhouse for God* (1988), Titon uses what is called “hermeneutic phenomenology” in a long term study of a Baptist church in rural Virginia. Hermeneutic phenomenology rests on the assumption that affect and performance in observed social settings can be interpreted as text. To this end, Titon gives large proportions of his writing over to word-for-word transcriptions of interviews, conversations, sermons, testimonies, sung texts, and other channels of discourse. He also provides detailed descriptions of events, personalities, and human relationships insofar as he is able to observe them. Titon is not interested so much in constructing a novel theoretical paradigm as he is in elucidated the interrelatedness of the many dynamics of a religious ritual—the prayers, music, rhetoric, sermons, and so on—and how they respond to and intersect with the lives of its participants. He would later question hermeneutic phenomenology, stating that “The world is not like a text to be read but like a musical performance to be experienced” (Titon 1997b:91). Nevertheless, the approach he takes to writing has highly influenced my own,

---

15 An approach originally developed by Paul Ricouer.
particularly his privileging of people’s own voices, emphasis on narrative, and accounting for the role of the researcher within the field:

Narrative, of course, is the way we habitually tell ourselves and others about our experiences, and so it emerges as a conventional form in phenomenologically weighted representations of people making music. At its best, a narrative weighting in the descriptive ethnography of a music-culture invites the reader to share, imaginatively, in the experiences that are presented (Titon 1997b: 96).

The second scholar to have a direct bearing on my methodology is Lila Abu-Lughod. Her promotion of “ethnographies of the particular” as a mode of “writing against culture” serves as a critique to the essentializing perspective that is prevalent in much scholarship on Southern Gospel music:

By focusing on particular individuals and their changing relationships, one would necessarily subvert the most problematic connotations of culture: homogeneity, coherence, timelessness….it becomes difficult to think that the term “Bedouin culture” makes sense when one tries to piece together and convey what life is like for one old Bedouin matriarch (Abu-Lughod 1991: 154).

At the same time, Abu-Lughod contends that “ethnographies of the particular” bear wider relevance:

First, refusing to generalize would highlight the constructed quality of that typicality so regularly produced in conventional social scientific accounts. Second, showing the actual circumstances and detailed histories of individuals and their relationships would suggest that such particulars, which are always present (as we know from our own personal experiences), are always crucial to the constitution of experience. Third, deconstructing people’s arguments about, justifications for, and interpretations of what they and others are doing would explain how social life proceeds…

…The special value of this strategy is that it brings out similarities in all our lives. To say that we all live in the particular is not to say that for any of us the particularities are the same. It could well be that even in looking at the everyday we
might discover fundamental differences, such as those between everyday experience in a
world set up to produce the effect of structures, institutions, or other abstractions, and in
worlds that have not. But the dailiness, in breaking coherence and introducing time,
keeps us fixed on flux and contradiction. And the particulars suggest that others live as
we perceive ourselves living, not as robots programmed with “cultural” rules, but as
people going through life agonizing over decisions, making mistakes, trying to make
themselves look good, enduring tragedies and personal losses, enjoying others, and

Abu-Lughod persuasively makes the point that a society is comprised of individuals
whose lives may or may not conform to an outsider’s understanding of “cultural rules” that
supposedly unify and direct the lives of those individuals. It is important, then, to examine the
daily lives of individuals as active agents within the larger social drama in order to understand
how those “cultural rules,” in reality, are (re)constructed, understood, and negotiated. Happily,
the participatory nature of much ethnomusicology lends itself well to “ethnographies of the
particular.”

Structure of the Thesis

The remainder of this thesis is structured as follows: Chapter 2 is devoted entirely to an
ethnographic description of Brotherly Love Ministries; its history; biographical background of its
founder, Ralph; as well as the Gospel Sing event itself. The chapter is divided into five sections.
The first provides a brief overview of the local environmental and sociological context of the
Gospel Sing. The second section serves to relate my initial encounter with Brotherly Love
Ministries. The third section relates Ralph’s musical and spiritual journey. The fourth section
discusses the founding of Brotherly Love Ministries, Ralph’s motivations for starting the church,
and his reasoning behind the structure of the service. The fifth section focuses on a single
performance by a participant named Bill as a vignette that is emblematic of individual, self-
processual worship. In Chapter 3, I provide a critical evaluation of the Gospel Sing. I begin by

16 For example, see Michael Bakan’s examination of the lives and careers of his two major Balinese
drumming mentors (Bakan 1999) and Marc Shade-Poulsen’s exploration of gender identity in Algerian raï music
(Shade-Poulsen 1999).
further locating liminality as an ontological domain present within the Gospel Sing. I then move to a discussion of communitas as it is effected both by the ontology of liminality and in the ritual structures of the Gospel Sing service. Within the ontological contexts of liminality and communitas, I discuss the promotion of self-empowerment as the primary function of the Gospel Sing, allowing participants an opportunity to create celebration for themselves and thus recover a sense of power over their lived experiences.
CHAPTER 2

ETHNOGRAPHY

...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God who worketh in you...

—Philippians 2:12-13 (King James Version)

Environmental and Sociological Context

Brotherly Love Ministries is located in the small town of Crawfordville in Wakulla County, just west of Florida’s Big Bend where the Florida peninsula meets the panhandle. Wakulla is commonly referred to as a sportsman’s paradise as it offers bountiful opportunities for hunting, fishing, camping, boating, hiking, wildlife viewing, and other outdoor activities. The Apalachicola National Forest, the largest forest in Florida, drapes the area with dense woods teeming with turkey, deer, wild hog, numerous small mammals, as well as the rare panther and bear. Manatees, otters, turtles, and of course, thousands of alligators inhabit the wetlands, which are fed by two relatively small rivers, the Wakulla and St. Mark’s, as well as the Gulf of Mexico. These waters abound with numerous species of fish, crustaceans, and shellfish, supporting a healthy commercial and sport fishing industry. Tourists flock to Wakulla Springs, the deepest freshwater springs in the world. Wakulla is also a popular birding spot, being an important migratory destination for bald eagles and other rare fowl. Winters are short and mild, and by late February, one can already sense the arrival of spring, knowing well that soon the roads will be gorgeously hemmed by the white flowers of blossoming dogwoods. By May, summer has arrived, blazing well to the end of October when it becomes obvious why refrigeration and air conditioning were invented in the nearby town of Apalachicola in 1851 by John Gorrie.
If this all sounds as if it were lifted from a tourist brochure, it is because Wakulla is, indeed, a living postcard of verdant splendor and natural wonder. Surprisingly, then, the county has historically been sparsely populated; in fact, the larger region to which it belongs is nicknamed The Forgotten Coast. In the last five years, however, this has begun to change. Wakulla, particularly the town of Crawfordville, has experienced a population boom as urban professionals, attracted by the natural beauty, slower pace of life, cheaper real estate, and proximity to the Gulf of Mexico, have flooded the area. Wakulla’s population has grown from an official number of 22,864 in 2000 to an estimated 28,212 in 2005.17 This nearly 25% increase marks it as the second fastest growing county in Florida. Predictably, it has begun to have a transformative effect on the region. Upwards of 7,000 new homes are expected to be built within the next few years, mostly in planned communities that cater to middle-class families but remain financially out of reach of many of those who have spent the majority of their lives here. Traffic has become congested along Highway 319, the area’s main thoroughfare, as a steady stream of commuters drive to and from Tallahassee. Small, family-run businesses now face an uncertain future as corporate entities, including Wal-Mart and Home Depot, have made plans to capitalize on the population growth.

Initial Encounter with Brotherly Love Ministries

I first came across Brotherly Love Ministries in June 2005, just a few weeks after my wife and I moved to Crawfordville so that I could begin graduate studies in ethnomusicology at Florida State University. While making the thirty-minute drive to Tallahassee one day, my curiosity was piqued by a small sign hanging from the corner eave of a small strip mall that said simply, “Gospel Sing—All Welcome!” I had since wanted to find out more about this “Gospel Sing,” and so, when during the 2006 Spring semester I was given the assignment in my fieldwork class to go out into the community and locate a musical event on which to base a term project, I decided to seize the opportunity to appease my curiosity.

Driving to school one morning in late January, I pulled over to examine the sign closer. In smaller lettering, there was a phone number along with the name, “Brotherly Love Ministries”

and an arrow pointing out back. With some nervousness and hesitancy, I dialed the number into my cell phone and was greeted by the gentle Southern drawl of a plainspoken female voice.

“Hello?” she said.

“Is this Brotherly Love Ministries?” I asked.

“Yes,” she replied, then silence.

For some reason, I had expected someone more vigorously outgoing—one of those charismatic peddlers of Christianity that one sees on the nether channels of late night television. Instead, I found myself feeling somewhat awkward as I began to fill the silence with my own blabber: “Oh, well, my name is Jason McCoy, and I’m a music student at FSU, and, well, my wife and I also go to church, but, um, I’m interested in learning about the different ways people worship around Wakulla, and I have this class project, and I was wondering about your service.”

“Uh huh, well, my name is Teresa Griffin and my husband’s name is Ralph. We’re the ones who run it. We meet every Saturday night about 6:45. We have dinner. No charge—we just want folks to feel comfortable. Then we’ll sing some songs and there’ll usually be some preaching, then we’ll sing some more. We’d be glad for you to come.”

“Great, I’ll definitely be there. This Saturday…6:45…got it.”

“All right, we’ll look forward to having you.”

I kindly thanked her and hung up. A few minutes later, my phone rang. It was Teresa calling me back.

“Hello?”

“Hi, this is Teresa. Just wanted to let you know to dress casually.”

That next Saturday evening I drove up to the strip mall and followed the sign’s arrow around back, where I found the doors open to a spacious, low-ceilinged rectangular room (see map below). To my left, a row of tables had been set up along the wall, on top of which sat a microwave, paper plates, utensils, cups, napkins, and several steaming food entrees. To my right sat three elderly men, one strumming an acoustic guitar, the other an electric guitar, and the third sitting quietly, somewhat apart from the others, staring thoughtfully ahead.

“Hi, my name’s Jason, how y’all doing?” I cheerfully called as I lapsed into my own Southern accent that I had acquired from a childhood surrounded by Southern Baptist missionaries. (It was a habit I was not fully conscious of, but thinking back on it, I believe it was
one strategy I employed to establish a level of connection and “puzzle” myself in with the group.

Figure 1: Map of Brotherly Love Ministries
The three men looked up with some surprise, as I assumed they had not had a young stranger come walking through their doors for some time. The man playing acoustic guitar introduced himself, “Well hi, I’m Bill.”

I briefly explained my reasons for being there before asking, “So, are you all the musicians?”

Bill laughed as he replied, “Musicians? Carl, could you call us musicians? Boy, I don’t know if you’ll find any musicians here, but we try to have some fun and worship the Lord anyhow.”

The other two men then introduced themselves. The electric guitar player was Carl, to whom Bill had just referred. The man sitting quietly off to the side was also named Bill.

Within a few minutes, another older man entered. He was thin, dressed in black jeans and a black button-down shirt, with salt and pepper hair neatly parted and combed—Johnny Cash lived! Though slightly stooped, he walked with a quick, long stride, his head thrust forward intently. He was soon followed by a woman of about the same age. She had a medium build with graying, sandy blonde hair, permed and feathered. I somehow sensed that this must be Teresa and Ralph. I introduced myself to them. As on the phone, Teresa was soft-spoken and kind, quickly excusing herself to finish preparing the food. Ralph, on the other hand, had an arresting personality, also kind, but forceful and loquacious, with coal-black eyes that sparkled when he smiled. We talked at some length about the service and its music. He told me that they liked to sing “Southern and Country Gospel songs,” rather than “church hymns.” He further explained that they hoped to provide a place for people who may not feel comfortable at other churches, a place where they would feel accepted and not judged.

Eventually, six or seven others arrived so that there were about a dozen present in all. About 7:15, Ralph and Teresa walked up to the “performance area” (see map above). Ralph picked up an electric bass and Teresa a tambourine. Along with Bill and Carl, they performed three songs. Teresa and Ralph did most of the singing while Bill and Carl accompanied, occasionally singing along on choruses. Stylistically, it sounded much like the honky-tonk music popularized by country/western musicians throughout the second half of the twentieth century. The songs were fairly slow, laid over an easy country swing pattern. The lyrics, on the other hand, emphasized various evangelical themes including the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ and the salvation it was believed to entail; the difficulties of life and the need for God’s
guidance and comfort; and the importance of living a moral lifestyle as commanded by the Bible. Bill, having only played guitar for a few years strummed along, sometimes picking out only the root of each chord. On occasion, he would drop out altogether for a few measures. In contrast, Carl, who had played with Ralph for many years, provided more complex inflections and ornamentations. By the middle of the second song, two other participants, a married couple named Bonnie and Irvin entered. At the start of the third song, Irvin sat down at an electric keyboard to the side of the ensemble and began playing along. After they finished, he asked Ralph about a certain chord of which he was unsure who, in turn, instructed him as to the proper chord changes. Meanwhile, I talked to his wife Bonnie, telling her off my interest in Southern Gospel. She replied that she had been singing Southern Gospel all her life but could no longer find a place to hear and perform it: “I love Southern Gospel, but they don’t have many of those tent revivals anymore where we used to sing these old songs. They don’t sing ‘em in the churches now, that’s for sure.”

It was a few minutes after 7:30 when they finished, at which time Ralph call out, “Hey, y’all ready to gather around for our mealtime?” The participants and I walked to an empty space before the food table, stood in a circle facing inward, and reached out for one another’s hands before Ralph asked, “Anyone here have anything on their heart they’d like to share?”

One participant, an elderly man, informed the group of a friend who was nearing the end of his life. Another spoke of problems with his knees that caused him pain and limited his mobility. Bill (the guitarist) told the group of a homeless teenage woman he was trying to help get off drugs and find housing. There were a few moments of silence after this as Ralph waited to see if anyone else had anything to share. He then nodded towards me and said, “We’re real glad to have Jason here with us tonight. It’s kinda’ nice for us to have a young guy come in here and show interest in what we do.” In kind, I told him how glad I was to be there as well.

Ralph then prayed, asking for God’s mercy and guidance concerning the matters expressed by the three participants. When he finished, we lined up along the food tables and served ourselves buffet-style. Not to be rude, I took only modest portions. Ralph, who was standing just in front of me, looked at my plate and chided, “Boy, you gotta take more than that. Sister Lucy made those chicken ‘n’ dumplings herself!” I happily helped myself to more before taking a seat at one of the dinner tables with a few of the other participants, introducing myself and engaging in small talk.
About a half-hour later, sometime after 8:00, Ralph, Teresa, Carl, Bill, and Irvin proceeded to the front to perform a few more songs. An elderly woman named Lucy, her sister (whose name I unfortunately never recorded), and an elderly man named Osmond remained at a dinner table in the back, continuing their conversation. Others scattered themselves about on the various rows of chairs facing the pulpit and performance area. There were far more chairs than there were attendants.

Ralph, Teresa, Bill, Carl, and Irvin played two songs. The second focused on the crucifixion of Christ. When they finished, Ralph said in a very serious tone, “An’ that’s why we’re here tonight. That’s why we’re able to sing, ‘cause of what the Lord did for us on that cross.”

As they began a third song, a middle-aged man named Richard removed a banjo from its case, where it had lain on a table by the front entrance along with several other cases for instruments and sound equipment. He busied himself with quietly tuning the banjo and plucking out a few patterns. After the other performers finished their second song, he called out, “Hey, you mind if I try playing a little banjo? I haven’t been playing long.”

“Sure, go right ahead,” Ralph replied

He joined the other musicians on the next song, following along as best as he could and occasionally dropping out when he had trouble with a certain chord change. Nevertheless, when the song finished, Ralph exclaimed, “Hey, that was alright!” The other participants clapped. The next song they performed, and the first one that I recognized, was “I’ll Fly Away.” Ralph exclaimed, “Now we’re gonna’ pick it up on this one. We’re gonna play it so that you feel like you might just up and fly away right here!” For sure, they did pick up the tempo. Bill and Richard grinned as they tried to keep pace. The other Bill, the one I first saw sitting alone in silence, stood up and clapped in beat with the music. Near the end of the song, when the energy was starting to peak, he began stomping his feet and shouting out, “Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Yes Lord! Yes Lord!”

When the song finished, Ralph grinned, looked at me and asked, “Well now, whaddya’ think of that?”

“Yeah, man, that was pretty good!” I responded.

Ralph then told the participants that it was time “to hear what the Lord’s got to say” as he placed a Bible on top of the pulpit and opened it. The participants took seats about the room and
listened quietly to his sermon. Ralph preached for about forty-five minutes. His themes focused on the promise of heaven and the dangers that the world posed to this promise. At the same time, he warned the participants from judging others, claiming that “only God can really judge a person’s heart.”

When he concluded, he gazed across the room for a few moments before asking, “Alright, anyone got a song or two they’d like to share?” Met by a few seconds of silence, he looked at Bonnie and Irvin and said, “Bonnie? Irvin? Y’all got something?”

Bonnie smiled as she and Irvin stood up and walked to the pulpit. The silence was not due to an unwillingness to perform but rather a desire to be humble and polite. Participants usually waited for Ralph to prompt them before performing. Bonnie sang two songs while Irvin accompanied on keyboard, his eyes closed. I sat next to Carl’s wife, who leaned over towards me and muttered in my ear, “I just love listening to her sing. She sounds just like Tammy Wynette.” A few weeks later, I learned that Irvin suffered from a severe narcoleptic disorder. The disorder forced him to quit his job as a Greyhound bus driver and made finding other work difficult. Like most of the participants, life was not easy for him, and the Gospel Sing was a great source of joy, a place that made him feel valued and allowed him an opportunity to create joy for himself and his wife.

After the two performed, Bonnie looked around at the instrumentalists sitting behind her and asked if they would like to join in. Ralph stood up and asked Teresa, “Where’s that songbook?” Teresa walked to a bookshelf near the back of the room, pulled out a large black three-ring binder, and brought it to the pulpit. Ralph and Bonnie leafed through it for a few moments before Bonnie said, “Oh, that’s a nice one, y’all know that one?”

“What’s that?” Irvin asked.

“It Was Jesus,” she replied.

“Oh yeah, okay,” he said.

Bill (the guitarist) then perked up and said, “What key y’all doing it in?”

“A chord,” Ralph responded, his way of calling out the key.

“Well, I know it’s a chord, but what chord is it?” Bill said more loudly.

“A chord!” Ralph shouted back.

Everyone laughed at the joke before the next song commenced, Teresa and Bonnie singing in duet with one another while the men accompanied.
Afterwards, Ralph looked back at Lucy, still sitting with her sister and Osmond.

“Whadda you got for us tonight, Sister Lucy?”

Lucy seemed to cringe as she said, “Ohhh, you don’t wanna hear me sing.”

“Sure we do, if you got somethin’ you’d like to sing for us!” Ralph said encouragingly.

“Well, I got a song I like to sing, but it’s on tape.” She reached into her purse to pull out a cassette tape, “Is that alright?”

“Yeah, we got a tape player up here, come on up!”

Lucy came forward and gave Ralph the tape who then inserted it into a cassette deck located behind an amplifier. The other performers took a seat and listened to her sing. Lucy was in her mid-60s. She drove a bus for the school district (“Number 87, the same as my age,” she would say). She recently took a second job working a night shift at the newly opened Super Wal-Mart in order to cover some new medical expenses and care for her ailing sister with whom she lived. Like many other participants, life was not easy for her. As she sang, she rocked back and forth from foot to foot in time with the music, staring somewhat nervously at the back of the room. There were moments when her voice grew feeble before she would renew her energy. Nevertheless, I found myself genuinely touched by the tenderness of her voice and the quiet earnestness with which she sang. When she finished, everyone clapped as Ralph exclaimed, “Now Sister Lucy, why don’t you sing more often?” Lucy waved off his comment as she quickly walked back to her seat, a wide smile gracing her face.

Ralph then asked a few others to sing. Through the various performances, I sat quietly on the second row, jotting down my observations. I was occasionally distracted by Ralph and Teresa’s eight year-old grandson, Tyson, who was fascinated with my portable voice recorder and camera. He pleaded with me to let him hold them. I gave in to his begging, even letting him snap a few pictures before Ralph barked, “Tyson, you leave Jason there alone lest you be wantin’ a whippin’ later on!” Tyson smiled sheepishly and sloughed off to the couch in the back of the room to see what his big sister, Kaylee, was up to.

Listening to successive performances by a three or four other participants, my attention admittedly waned when it was suddenly jolted by Ralph asking me if I would like to sing a song. I panicked.

“Well, I don’t really know these songs. This is all new to me!”
“I’m sure there’s one or two you’re familiar with,” Ralph kindly replied as he handed me a large black three-ring binder containing the lyrics to most of the songs they regularly performed. I was not sure what to do. To stand up there and sing, to actively participate in the worship was to bind myself to the field, a role I was not sure I was ready to accept. To choose not to sing, however, would possibly come off as insulting. Looking back, I am sure I made too much of the issue—I believe Ralph was simply trying to be considerate, making sure to give everyone present an opportunity to share their music with the group—but being in a place of such unfamiliarity, such matters tend to become overly dramatized.

In the end, my curiosity won out. Flipping through the binder, I came across an old gospel hymn that I had sung numerous times as a boy: “Victory in Jesus.”

“You got a pretty low voice; think you can do it in C?” Ralph asked.

“Um, sure!” I replied.

It was too low. I croaked out the song as best as I could. I also botched the refrain as I could not remember the melody. Nevertheless, when the song ended, everyone clapped as I smiled sheepishly.

“That was fine, brother!” Ralph extolled me, “How about another?”

“Oh, no, maybe I’ll sing more next week!”

I certainly never experienced a worship service quite like it. My nervousness and embarrassment ebbed at the genuinely warm and affirming response of the other participants. It did not seem to matter that I sang poorly. The positive response arose, instead, from the part I played in reflecting, validating, and reinforcing their beliefs through a musical style and rhetoric with which they were closely familiar. Moreover, in my affirmation of their beliefs and their way of worship, and in their graceful response to my lack of what we might call “cultural competence,” that evening’s community of worshipers was strengthened.

The following Monday afternoon, I met Ralph at the church in order to interview him and find out more about his own background, his beliefs, and what led him to start the church.
Ralph’s Story

Ralph was born in the mid-1940’s and raised in Tallahassee. Though his immediate family was not comprised of practicing musicians, he was interested in music from a young age. The strongest influence on him as a child was his Aunt Betty, who traveled and performed intermittently with a country duo named Jim and Jessie. At family reunions, Aunt Betty would sing for the family, joined by three of Ralph’s male cousins, all of whom sported a rockabilly image—slicked back hair, sunglasses, a “Joe Cool” attitude. Ralph idolized his cousins and tried to emulate them. When he was 14, he began playing guitar, sneaking into local honky-tonk bars to observe the professionals. By the time he was 17, he was playing both guitar and drums with different bands at various bars and other venues around Tallahassee. Though he listened to the popular music of the day—the Beach Boys, the Rolling Stones, Credence Clearwater Revival—he grew bored of it. The father of a friend of his was a guitarist, and he turned Ralph onto the country music of Merle Haggard, George Jones, Johnny Cash, Hank Williams, and so forth. Ralph was hooked.

While still 17, Ralph married Teresa. They had a son, forcing him to drop out of school in order to work (he would later take the state GED exam). He secured a job with the motorcycle division of Yamaha, racing dirt bikes and demonstrating products for local dealers. He worked for about two or three years when, during one race, he fell off the bike and suffered a crushing injury to his spine that put him in a back brace for a year. The injury ended his career and would continue to cause him chronic health problems throughout his life (as he says, his height will actually change by a few inches depending on the weather).

After recovering, he and Teresa entered into a business deal with a friend, opening a guitar shop in northern Tallahassee called Scott Tennyson’s Guitar Service. They also moved south to Wakulla because he believed the air pollution in Tallahassee was making him sick.

Up to this point, Ralph had little interest in matters of faith or attending church, though he did go as a child (“I had a ‘drug problem’—momma and daddy drug me to church every time the door was open”). This lack of interest, however, began to change a few years after the birth of their son.
Ralph: …whenever we got married an’ our first boy started to get a few years old, me ‘n’ my wife talked and said, “Well, you know, maybe we oughta’ raise this boy in church.” Now, I hadn’t gotten so wild yet. I was playin’ in the honky-tonks and bands, you know, and stuff. So we decided one Sunday morning that we’d get up an’ get dressed an’ go to church, an’ so we got up and got dressed—but this is when it comes down to the difference between Christianity and church. An’ we got dressed, an’ we put on the best we had—young couple, working class, amen, goin’ to church, you know? It had been years, you know, several years since I been in church. An’ I put on a pair of burgundy corduroys—Levi’s jeans, but they were corduroys, burgundy colored. Or may have been brown, I dunno, I have brown ones an’, you know, gray ones, an’ the burgundy ones. But I put on a pair of corduroys an’ a pair of desert boots—you remember the ol’ Hush Puppy desert boots—an’ a button-up shirt. We got up to the first church, an’ when we drove up there, everybody was all dressed up real fancy, suits an’ ties an’ all this. They turned us away at the door.

Jason: An’ for you, you thought you were lookin’ pretty good?

Ralph: I was lookin’ pretty sharp! I played in honky-tonks and bars! At least I wasn’t wearing my cowboy boots! But at the door, the preacher stops me an’ says, “Son, we appreciate you all thinkin’ about it, but…” an’ he looked at his watch and said, “well, you know you got time, an’ if you don’t live too far, you can go back home and change clothes, but you need to put on something, you know, that’s decent enough to present yourself before the Lord in…”

Jason: So they turned you away at this church? That probably kinda’ made you think, “Well, I don’t wanna go there.”

Ralph: Not there! No, I said, I don’t even got none of them [clothes]. So, well then, we drove—there were several churches right there in a row on Crawfordville Highway there—so we drove up to the next church. Pulled up
there, an’ well, I had a pack of cigarettes in my pocket. An’ the preacher of that church, whole bunch of people standin’ around talkin’…we come walkin’ up there. That preacher looked at my pocket and thumped me on the pocket and says, “Boy, you can’t come into my church with them in your pocket.” An’ I was a sinner. I wasn’t, you know, like I said, I had been to church younger an’ been baptized an’ all that, but I wasn’t livin’ the life of no Christian. An’ that flew all over me—he embarrassed me in front of all of them people! An’ I thought, you know, what in the world is this, everybody where we went, we was getting’ judged. An’ I told him, “Well, I’m sorry, I didn’t know this was your church, I thought it was God’s church, but since it’s your’s, why don’t you take it and stick it where the sun don’t shine!”

Turned around an’ got in my car, an’ well, the next church down the road—that was two Baptist churches—the next church down the road was a Methodist church. We pulled in at the Methodist church. By the time we got down there, it was a few minutes after eleven, an’ I walked up there an’ the doors were closed, an’ I heard ‘em sayin’ that—they was prayin’. So I just stood there quiet while they was sayin’ their prayer. An’ then I went to open the doors, an’ they had an usher, an’ he opened the door, an’ he said, “The service starts at eleven o’clock. We’d be glad to have you, but try to get here on time next week,” an’ he shut the door in my face.

So there was three churches that we got turned away at. One of the worst days of my life!

Ralph went on to explain that, still determined to go to church, he met with a Pentecostal preacher that he had known since childhood. The preacher expressed his regrets at the treatment Ralph and his family received and invited him to the Pentecostal church, though with one stipulation: he forbade Ralph from playing in the honky-tonks and bars. Ralph was furious at this request, for this was his primary means of providing for his family.

I believe that Ralph also felt profoundly dejected. Ralph noted that “immediately, everybody was puttin’ demands on you.” He yearned for an inner, spiritual transformation, and was actively seeking such an experience through the religious institution that was most familiar
to him—the local church. Arriving at each church, open and willing but psychologically vulnerable, he was rejected at every turn, made to feel unworthy of belonging to those communities where he believed spiritual transformation could be experienced. He was essentially told that one such as himself was not capable of spiritual transformation, and I suspect that such condemnation must have been crushing.

RALPH: I never darkened the doors of a church again for twenty-five years. If this was religion, I don’t want no part of it. I ain’t got nothing but a hard time by this bunch of so-called Christians. An’ them people down at them bars loved me, you know? They can’t wait to see me show up…an’ most of the churches, even with the way I play now, most of your bigger churches, they wouldn’t let me play or sing in there, certainly a lot of the other people we have [at Brotherly Love Ministries], they wouldn’t let them play or sing.

But Ralph did not lay the blame for his rejection squarely on the shoulders of the local churches. He also credited a more divine, supernatural cause for his marginalization, noting that “the Bible says you can’t come till the Father draws, and he wasn’t really drawing on me.” Ralph then related that in 1995, God finally did, indeed, start to “draw on him.”

Starting a lawn care business, he needed to have a trailer hitch welded to his truck in order to haul his equipment. He visited the local welder, who, as it turned out was also a Pentecostal preacher. The preacher asked Ralph if he was saved. Ralph, of course, answered yes, as he had been baptized as a young boy. The preacher then wondered aloud: if Ralph were saved, why didn’t he attend church? Ralph was still in no mood to attend church after his painful encounter some 25 years prior. He also did not think it necessary, believing his salvation was assured on account of his boyhood baptism. The preacher, however, began to challenge Ralph’s theology. He handed Ralph a business card that said, “If you meet me and forget me, you’ve lost nothing, but if you ever meet Jesus and forget him, then you’ve lost it all.”

RALPH: See, I was under the old Baptist teaching on “once saved, always saved.” That ain’t true. That’s a lie, a lie of the devil. An’ I was the one that was deceived under that lie.
Still, Ralph was upset. He felt this preacher was just another Christian placing unreasonable demands on him. Ralph went on to have his trailer hitch welded somewhere else, but soon after, as things go, the trailer hitch broke just as Ralph was driving by the preacher’s house. Hat in hand, Ralph asked the preacher to fix the hitch. Asking how much he owed, the preacher simply told him there would be no charge, but instead, he would like Ralph to start coming to church. Ralph still refused. Interestingly enough, though, the preacher’s son oftentimes played with Ralph at the bar. Ralph forbade his bandmates from drinking during sets (he said it makes you sloppy and he was serious about his music), and for this, the preacher was grateful. Ralph and the preacher eventually became good friends. Highly impressed by Ralph’s musicianship, the preacher urged Ralph to come play, if not for Sunday morning service—which Ralph refused to do—then for a Gospel Sing the church was holding one Sunday afternoon.

RALPH: Somehow or another I got the times all mixed up. I thought he said the Sing was gonna’ start at four. Well, it was gonna’ be over with at four. So I thought myself getting’ there early—got there about three-fifteen, three-thirty—an’ I come in for the last few minutes of the Sing that they had. But when I came in there and sat down, that’s when the Lord dealt with my heart. I sat on the back pew right next to the door. An’ there was three girls standin’ up there singin’ and it sounded like a choir of angels. An’ I looked around that room, an’ I felt like a worm…an’ then the Spirit of the Lord, you know, fell on me—that conviction. That’s why I don’t have to preach condemnation and conviction, ‘cause I know what happened to me, an’ them girls was just standin’ up there singin’. Tears started flowin’ down my face. If they’d ‘a’ givin’ an altar call, I’d ‘a’ went right then, but, you know, they didn’t. But, you know, it was all in God’s plan.

So I got away from it, you know. So a couple weeks later, I said, you know, I told my wife, “You know, I’m gonna go down there to that church, you know.” An’ [the preacher] always tell me, “When you come to church, bring your guitar with you.” So I threwed my guitar in the van, went down there an’ went on in. An’ he said, “Hey man, good to see you, how ya doin’…blah blah blah…but where’s your guitar?”
An’ I said, “Well, it’s out there in the van.”
“Well, why didn’t you bring it in with you?”
An’ I said, “Well I didn’t wanna’, you know…”
“No, no! You go get that guitar and bring it in here.”

So I brought it in, an’ he just put me right up there playin’ like, you know, an’ that right there, whenever they gave an altar call, I was the first one down there. Gave my heart to Jesus. An’ I come home, told my wife, you know, I said, “Well, Jesus saved me today.”

She looked at me an’ said, “Oh yeah? Okay.”

JASON: She didn’t quite believe you yet, huh?

RALPH: No, but she seen it. When Jesus saves you, there’s a change takes place.

Soon after, Ralph and Teresa began regularly attending church, with Ralph playing lead guitar during services. He still had two months of bookings at the bars which he fulfilled out of a sense of duty, but interestingly enough, it was now the bars, not the church, that became a place of personal marginalization.

RALPH: Man, you talkin’ about miserable. Man, that was the most miserable two months of my life. Sure enough, you know, the language, all of sudden, that language just cut me like a knife, you know? An’ the things they’d say and do and all. An’ the last weekend we played, we was playin’ out at—I think it was called the Seminole Tavern out on Highway 20. We was out there, and the lady that was the manager of the bar—the guy that I was playin’ with, she called him and said, “That feller there, he sings and plays good, but somethin’s—what’s wrong with him? He just don’t fit.”

An’ he told her, he said, “Oh, he’s a Christian.”

She said, “I knew there was somethin’ wrong with him!”
After that, Ralph never played in a bar again. For the next four years, the church became Ralph’s main outlet for musical expression. Then, in 1999, his life again took a significant turn. His old back injury started troubling him so much that he was no longer able to work and was officially declared disabled. He tried earning money repairing bicycles and doing other odd jobs, but opportunities were scarce. He became very sedentary, ate poorly, and rarely left the house.

Ralph demonstrated for me a few non-standard chord voicings that he fervently believed “the Lord showed him.” Ralph, indeed, now saw his whole life as divinely ordered.

While recovering from the stroke, Ralph began an in-depth, personal study of the Bible, believing ardently that every word of it was to be taken literally. His study, his strict literalist stance, and his nonconformist disposition led him to doctrinal conclusions that put him at odds with the Pentecostal church’s pastor and congregants. While they badgered Ralph about his smoking habit, there were more complex issues over which they disagreed. A major point of contention, for instance, that illustrated Ralph’s firm literalist stance was the issue of what words
to speak when baptizing a new believer. While the preacher baptized “in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost,” Ralph believed it should be “in the name of Jesus Christ.”

Ralph: Repent and be baptized. If we stopped right there, there’s the salvation message. Change your ways and repent. Be sorrowful for, and change course. Change your ways, start doin’ good, and followin’ the Lord and his commandments. Trust Jesus for salvation and be baptized.

Jason: That’s all there is to it, okay…

Ralph: But now [Jesus] said, every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ, and for—and here’s the reason—for the remission of sins, to get your sins washed away, through the name. I don’t know why people have a problem with the name. An’ I show ’em, this is what I believe and what I’m responsible for. You do what you want to, it ain’t my place to judge you.

Jason: So if someone were baptized “in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,” you’d still call them a Christian, right?

Ralph: Certainly, according to their works. We know ‘em by the fruit they bear. If I was still out there gettin’ drunk, cussin’, tellin’ dirty jokes, hangin’ around the bars, would I be a Christian? Hmm…this is for me. I ain’t tryin’ to force anybody else into it. This is for me.

Jason: ‘Cause, you know, you still smoke now, right?

Ralph: Yeah.

Jason: But now, you think that’s alright, even though some people say, “No, that’s not right.” So it’s kinda like you’re sayin’ you gotta figure it out for yourself?
RALPH: We all have to live within our own convictions. I’m convicted over drinking. I don’t preach against drinking. It’s fine for people to…but it’s a stumbling block for me.

JASON: But cigarettes aren’t a stumbling block?

RALPH: It ain’t a stumbling block for me! I smoke and serve the Lord! There’s plenty of non-smokers out there who gonna’ bust hell wide open if they don’t change their ways, you know?

JASON: Well, this word “name” seems to be real important to you, because “the name”—that’s what you identify with.

RALPH: I’m a Jesus man! I’m a Jesus man! I identify with Jesus.

JASON: And the music you make now is under that “name”? You identify your music with that “name,” you connect it to that “name,” whereas before, you didn’t…

RALPH: The only Lord I attributed that other music to was through Lord Calvert.18

Creating Brotherly Love Ministries

Ralph and Teresa left their church so that Ralph could start his own in accordance with his personal convictions. He and Teresa scrounged together whatever funds they could muster. They rented the empty space—a vacated karate studio—behind the strip mall, laid carpeting, painted the walls, bought chairs, tables, and other furniture, and set up sound equipment. Ralph envisioned a church that felt relaxed, comfortable, and welcoming with a service in which there

18 Lord Calvert is a cheap brand of whiskey.
would be little structure and a relatively high degree of freedom, one that he felt would be the antithesis of those churches that turned him away so many years ago. For example, there would be no sort of dress code.

RALPH: So, if you wonder about this ministry, why we don’t have a dress [code]—it’s casual dress down here. ‘Cause the Lord, he don’t care whether you wearin’ a thousand dollar suit or you wearin’ a pair of Wal-Mart jeans an’ a t-shirt. You ain’t gonna’ impress him with how you dress, as long…well, we go by the Bible code. The Bible says havin’ your nakedness covered, to be dressed modestly, with shamefacedness, professing holiness. An’ I don’t think when you come through the door the other night, you seen anyone outside of that. If somebody comes in with a three-piece suit, ain’t nobody gonna’ look at him strange. If they come in here walking in a pair of sandals an’ a pair of shorts, ain’t nobody gonna’ look, you know?

Beyond the relaxed, undemanding atmosphere, Ralph also envisioned a church centered on musical participation.

RALPH: That’s what this ministry’s all about. It is a big music ministry to allow people to do what people love to do—that you can have the greatest voice in the world, but if you don’t follow them, but if you don’t fall in with the norm, you can’t sing in the choir, you know? An’ some of the smaller churches will let you sing a special every now and then, but if you like me, if you love singin’, you wanna sing all the time, you know! An’ that’s what the Bible says—why would you light a candle and then put it up under a bushel basket, you know, put it up and hide it. Let that light shine for them people! Let them be a part!
As previously stated, the music sounded much like the music one would hear at a honky-tonk bar; that is, it was a honky-tonk treatment of gospel hymnody. As such, it was a sound that reflected a social scene with which most of the participants were intimately familiar in their pre-Christian lives. However, instead of discarding the musical remnants of their former lives, the Gospel Sing represented an integration of their lives before and after conversion. Stylistically, the Gospel Sing recalled the honky-tonk scene and the “sinfulness” that this represented for the Gospel Sing participants, but through its gospel lyrics, it rhetorically transformed the musical style, purifying and consecrating it, and in turn, representing the conversion of the participants. Unlike some others who experience a radical religious conversion that compels them to turn from all that represented their pre-conversion lives, the Gospel Sing participants were essentially still their “old selves” who now viewed and experienced the world in a new way as they filtered their lives through their interpretation of the Bible.

Again, the Gospel Sing sounded and functioned much like a honky-tonk jam session. The instrumentation could change from week to week, depending on who attended. There were never any drums, but that was simply because none of the participants played drums (Teresa often played tambourine). A guitar was always present—because, obviously, Ralph was always
present—but at various times, there were participants who played banjo, keyboards, bass, and other guitars. As well, there were various vocal combinations. Some sang solos, others in duets, trios, and quartets. I preferred singing duets with Bonnie as I enjoyed improvising my own harmonic lines. Whatever the ensemble, Ralph happily accommodated musicians by taking on complementary roles. For example, if someone enjoyed playing lead guitar, he played rhythm guitar. If someone preferred to sing softly while simply strumming chords on an acoustic guitar, he might support them by playing electric bass. Despite his musical skill—and no doubt, Ralph was masterfully skillful as I was often joyfully reminded on those occasions when he ripped into a solo—he showed no displeasure in taking a musically diminished role. I believe that while Ralph loved to make “good” music, his ultimate joy came in the musical expression of a Christian faith that reflected his own, the community that formed around that expression of faith, as well as, perhaps, his own quiet knowledge of the hand he had in creating a place where such an experience was possible.

Figure 3: Performance Area

There was a time, before I arrived, when the community that Ralph had striven to foster was threatened. Soon after Brotherly Love Ministries opened its doors, many came, not to worship with others, but to perform for them.
JASON: How do you feel about people who wanna’ come to Brotherly Love Ministries just to hear the music?

RALPH: Just for the music? They’re comin’ for the wrong reasons…Now we use—like I said, it takes different kind of bait to catch different kind of fish. The music helps draw a lot of people, because we don’t have a membership role. We’re not tryin’ to rob other churches out of their people. But this is an alternative, just like you can go to your church on Sunday morning an’ if you wanna’ come down here on Saturday night—it’s the fellowship thing, an’ a lot of the people were not comin’ for the fellowship. They weren’t comin’ to hear the music; they were comin’ to be seen.

JASON: They were comin’ to be seen?

RALPH: To be seen. They were other musicians and stuff, and whenever they got through performin’, out the door they went. They wouldn’t stay and listen to everyone else—that would’ve fine if they would stay. They wouldn’t show up for the sermon. They’d show up for the dinner, and for the singin’, and then they was gone…so that’s when the Lord had me change it, ‘cause it used to we’d just sing a few songs to start, an’ then we’d have our message, an’ then we’d have our meal. Well these people I’m talkin’ about would show up at meal time—they knew about what time. They’d eat the dinner, an’ then if they weren’t within the first two or three groups to sing, they’d get aggravated an’ leave. They didn’t wanna listen to nobody else…We want people to come fellowship with us.

JASON: This is not a concert; it’s not a competition…

RALPH: It’s about brotherly love, about love for the brother, encouraging the brother, preferring the brethren, condescending to those of low estate—*let them do and let them feel what we feel*. 
In fact, those that were coming “to be seen” were reflecting a prominent, longstanding tradition of gospel music performed in large singing conventions that highlighted competition between professional gospel musicians who sought publicity and sales. This is not to say that such venues did not also engender community among the musicians and attendees, but such competitive and commercial motivations ran counter to Ralph’s desire to develop a deeply intimate, worshiping community. In response, Ralph moved the meal to the beginning of the service, shortly following it up thereafter with the sermon. The actual Gospel Sing portion, therefore, did not begin until much later. Those who attended only “to be seen,” then, had to estimate what time the Gospel Sing would begin and were just as likely to arrive in the middle of the sermon. As a result, the numbers dwindled from about fifty participants to anywhere between ten and thirty; most Saturdays that I attended, there were usually no more than about fifteen. Nevertheless, those that remained had motivations that were in line with Ralph’s vision for his church.

A few of the “regulars” I have already mentioned. They included, of course, Ralph and Teresa and their two grandchildren over whom they had custody. Others included Sister Lucy, Osmond, Bonnie and Irvin, Richard, and both Bills. Most of Gospel Sing participants seemed to have had their share of struggles along the way. As stated, Ralph was an alcoholic for a good part of his life, as was his friend Carl who played the honky-tonk circuit with him before also turning from that life. Both suffered from disabilities as well—Ralph with his back and Carl with his knee—that impaired their mobility and caused a significant degree of physical pain. Bill (the guitar player) spent portions of his life on the streets as a self-described pothead and alcoholic. He now ran a machine saw, cutting lumber for a housing construction company, but he still made little money (it was not uncommon for him to joke about his electricity being turned off the previous week). He also worked out of his home with younger people who were dealing with drug addictions and living on the streets, feeding them, providing a place to stay for few nights, and helping them get connected to proper social services.
Not surprisingly, the rhetorical content of much of the music both celebrated the prospect of one day escaping earthly trials and living forever in heaven, but it also reminded the participants that there was still a hard road ahead in which they would be embattled by the temptation to fall back into their “old lives.” They believed that Satan and his demons were very real entities who worked persistently to eradicate their salvation. The songs, therefore, urged participants to rely on earnest prayer, Bible reading, and church attendance, in order to establish a strong sense of connection to God that would compel them to conform to the necessary moral lifestyle that would insure salvation.

There is little need to give a full account of their entire repertoire, but to give some sense of this rhetoric, I provide demonstrative samples of lyrics of a few of the more regularly performed songs.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{19} Variations of these lyrics exist. I have transcribed the lyrics based on my recordings of performances at Brotherly Love Ministries.
“Stand Toe to Toe with the Devil”

Verse 1:

O, the river of the age, flowing deep and wide,
    Bringing out the boat you was in.
O, Satan’s out to getcha, and he won’t be satisfied
    Till you’re over your head in sin.

Chorus:

You gotta stand toe to toe with the Devil;
You can’t walk hand in hand with his friends,
    You gotta fight him everyday,
Get down on your knees and pray,
If you wanna meet your Maker face to face.

Verse 2:

Let the Bible fight your battles, and as sure as you’re born,
    You’ll find a way to stand your ground.
With God Almighty’s weapon, take the Devil by the horns,
    It’s the only way to bring him down.

“Hallelujah, I’m Ready to Go”

Chorus:

(Solo): Hallelujah
(Response): I’m ready
(Solo): I’m ready
(Response): Hallelujah
(All): I can feel the voices singing soft and low.
(Solo): Hallelujah
(Response): I’m ready
(Solo): I’m ready
(Response): Hallelujah
(All): Hallelujah, I’m ready to go.

Verse 1:

Dark was the night,
Not a star was in sight,
    On the highway heading down below.
I let my Savior in,
And he saved my soul from sin,
   Hallelujah, I’m ready to go.

Verse 2:

Sinner don’t wait,
Before it’s too late,
   He’s a wonderful Savior to know.
I fell on my knees,
He answered my pleas,
   Hallelujah, I’m ready to go.

“Ain’t No Grave”

Chorus:

Ain’t no grave gonna hold my body down.
Ain’t no grave gonna hold my body down.
   When I hear the trumpet sound
      Gonna get up outa the ground,
‘Cause there ain’t no grave gonna hold my body down.

Verse 1:

Meet me, Jesus, meet me,
   Meet me in the middle of the air,
I’m gonna rise, see my Lord,
   Say good-bye right there.
Well, I look way over yonder,
   What do you think I see?
See a band of angels, Lord,
   They’re comin’ after me.

Verse 2:

Well, go down yonder, Gabriel,
   Put your foot on the land and the sea,
Don’t you blow that trumpet, Gabriel,
   Until you hear from me.
Well, I’m goin’ down to the river there,
   Put my knees down in the sand,
I’m gonna holler “Hallelujah!”
   Till I reach that Promised Land.
“God on the Mountain”

Verse 1:

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

Chorus:

For the God on the mountain is still God in the valley.
   When things go wrong, he'll make it right.
And the God of the good times is still God in the bad times.
   The God of the day is still God in the night.

Verse 2:

You talk of faith when you're up on the mountain.
   Oh, but the talk comes easy when life's at its best.
But it's down in the valley of trials and temptation,
   That's when faith is really put to the test.

Some of the songs did not always come out of the gospel repertoire. For example, Ralph and Teresa often performed a secular country love song by Don Williams called “The Shelter of Your Eyes.” Within a worshiping context, however, the meaning of the lyrics was transformed to reflect their experience of God as deeply intimate, emotional, even romantic. The song is also somewhat autobiographical, speaking to Ralph’s sense of security, comfort, and peace as a result of his conversion while still serving as a reminder that this positive feeling can only be maintained through conformity to the lifestyle for which the Bible (God) calls.

“The Shelter of Your Eyes”

Verse:

In the shelter of your eyes,
   I have finally learned the song,
It took so long to realize,
   I just can’t make it all alone.
Words are only what they say,
   But this feeling isn’t wrong.
I’m so glad I found my way,
   It’s good to be where I belong.
Chorus:

And I’m gonna stay right here,
    ‘Cause I’m in rhythm with your mind.
Tune out the world and rest my head,
    ‘Neath the shelter of your eyes.

Bill’s “Musical Testimony”

I found Bill’s weekly performance to be the most illustrative of the opportunity the Gospel Sing afforded participants to enact their own experience of salvation as a response to the need to confirm their salvations.

Bill was a bear of a man—tall, thick-bodied, with a large, bushy gray beard that would make him the envy of any Christmas party (sadly, he later shaved it off). Quick to laughter, self-effacing, but at times, also quiet and introspective, he often related stories of his “old life” of both financial and moral destitution, a time when he was caught up in a host of “sins,” including illegal drug activity. Now in his early sixties, he had long since left that life behind but freely admitted to the temptation to return to some of his former ways. The Gospel Sing was especially critical for Bill as a venue to regularly remind himself to maintain the sort of Christian lifestyle that he believed would ensure his salvation and discourage him from those behaviors that would ultimately condemn him. Besides Ralph and Teresa, Bill was the only participant who attended every single Saturday throughout the time I conducted my fieldwork.

Bill’s performance was somewhat different than the other participants, if not necessarily in terms of style, then in content. Mainly, he played the same three songs every Saturday. He had only played guitar for a few years and so only knew how to perform a scant number of songs, but his lack of experience did not explain his particular selection. More revealing is when he said before performing one night, “This is my testimony.” Singing and playing guitar alone, in an earnest, warbling, out-of-tune voice (to which he would happily admit), he would begin with the old gospel standard, “Further Along.”
“Further Along”

Verse 1:

Tempted and tried we're oft made to wonder
    Why it should be thus all the day long,
While there are others living about us
    Never molested though in the wrong.

Chorus:

Farther along we'll know all about it,
    Farther along we'll understand why.
Cheer up my brother, live in the sunshine
    We'll understand it all by and by.

Verse 2:

When death has come and taken our loved ones,
    It leaves our home so lonely and drear,
And then do we wonder why others prosper,
    Living so wicked year after year.
Verse 3:

When we see Jesus coming in glory,
    When he comes down from his home in the sky,
Then we shall meet him in that bright mansion,
    We'll understand it all by and by.

This he followed with Willie Nelson’s “In God’s Eyes.” An interesting musical element of this particular song is its direct modulation to IV (i.e. from the key of C to the key of F) for a few measures, employing a IV/IV chord (i.e. Bb) not found in the original key, before modulating back to the original key. Bill laughed that he could never figure out that “darned chord” and so altered the melody so that the IV/IV would not be necessary. In so doing, he further personalized and internalized the song and its message.

“In God’s Eyes”

Never think evil thoughts of anyone,
    It's just as wrong to think as to say,
For a thought is but a word that's unspoken,
    In God’s eyes he sees it this way.

Lend a hand if you can to a stranger,
    Never worry if he can't repay,
For in time you'll be repaid ten times over,
    In God’s eyes he sees it this way.

In God's eyes we're like sheep in a meadow,
    Now and then a lamb goes astray,
But open arms should await its returning,
    In God’s eyes he sees it this way.

Finally, Bill would conclude with “That I Could Still Go Free,” written and recorded by The Hinsons.

“That I Could Still Go Free”

Verse 1:

Lock me up in a prison and throw away the key,
Take away my vision from these eyes that now can see,
Deprive me of the food I eat and even bind my hands and feet,
But as long as I have Jesus, then I can still go free.

Chorus:

Said I could still go free,
What kind of man
Would reach down his hand
And do this for me?
Unworthy to live and not fit to kill,
But a man on the cross put me in his will,
Says I can still go free.

Verse 2:

I never could quite understand why a king would leave His throne,
Put on the robe of an earthly man, feel the pain of flesh and bone,
Then to later walk that lonely path that led to Calvary,
Oh the blood red stains broke all my chains that I could still go free.

The next chapter will examine more closely the content of these songs, the context in which they were performed, and their relationship to the lives of the Gospel Sing participants. For now, though, the following statement, uttered by Bill to the other participants during one of his performances, gives us some glimpse into the reasons behind the earnestness with which Bill and other participants worshiped.

BILL: …but when we get saved, and we’re goin’ down the right path, we get tempted, we get weak, we walk off from the path, and if we don’t listen to that little voice, if we don’t listen to that little voice… he ain’t gonna’ throw no chain around you and pull you back ‘cause you got free will…but if you walk off and leave everything, you’re gonna’ go on straight to hell…it’s so easy to do, so easy to do…

Indeed, in the lifeworld of the Gospel Sing participants, the stakes could not be higher. Worship was a matter of life and death, as they believed condemnation lay on either side of a razor’s edge on which believers must walk until the moment they draw their last breaths. Salvation awaited those who were focused and disciplined, but such focus and discipline is
difficult to sustain in an ever-changing, complex world that seems to offer the opportunity for so much pleasure in the here and now. Where other institutions, religious or otherwise, failed them, the Gospel Sing empowered its participants to negotiate that world to their supreme inner benefit, casting aside such “common” aspirations as increasing social status, wealth, and power as merely trivial, and holding up salvation as the only thing that mattered. Their belief in salvation, in turn, gave them reason to celebrate, while at the same time, their empowered ability to celebrate—to create celebration for themselves—further confirmed their salvation.
CHAPTER 3

ANALYSIS

We are world-makers; we are constantly making “new worlds out of old ones.” What we see, perceive, touch is all in flux—a flux of our own creation. The real psychological question is how we shape this flux and how we maneuver in it.

—Hilary Putnam

The following analysis draws from ethnographic examples to demonstrate how liminality, as the effect of salvationist belief, applies to the ontological realities of the Gospel Sing participants. Such ontological liminality implies a psychological freedom from, or buttress against, the constraints, directives, judgments and presumptions of ordinary society. Thus, liminality provides for the participants a world of new possibilities such that old self-destructive habits and negative thought patterns that had once seized them are loosened. Within this liminal context, the Gospel Sing cultivates communitas, promoting an environment in which individual participants feel free to perform music, regardless of their ability, and in so doing, create for themselves an experience of celebration.

Liminality and the Gospel Sing

Victor Turner observed that the experience of liminality within rites of passage was chiefly constituted by two characteristics: separation or detachment from social structure and

---

unity and equality with others in the same liminal state, the experience of which he referred to as communitas. I will address the issue of communitas in a separate section below. Here, though, I will draw from ethnographic examples to demonstrate how a sense of separation and detachment from ordinary society manifested itself, first in the ontological realities of the Gospel Sing participants as well as in the ritual of the Gospel Sing itself.

Ontological liminality flowed from salvationist belief which placed participants in a state between this world and the next. They viewed the world as corrupt, wicked, and dangerous to their salvation. In response, they sought to remove themselves from the ill effects of society through lives devoted to Bible reading, prayer, and worship. As liminal beings separated from ordinary society, they also believed they lived in a world full of supernatural entities—God, Satan, angels, and demons—who directly affected their lives. Some participants testified to direct communion with these entities.

One evening as things were winding down, Ralph and I sat on a bench just outside the front door of the church. I asked him how he could be so sure of his interpretation of the Bible. Removing the cigarette from his mouth, he looked over at me, tapped the back of his skull just behind his ear and said, “’Cause you hear that little voice.”

“You actually hear a voice?” I skeptically asked.

He replied by telling me the following story. “Many years ago—this must’ve been in the late 80s—I was drinking a whole bunch, real bad, and mistreatin’ my wife so that she was just about ready to throw me out. An’ I was standin’ out in the yard one night after one of our fights an’ I hear this voice, just as clear as I can hear you right now, and it said, ‘Boy, you’re about to lose the most important thing in your life.’ Now I wasn’t no Christian yet, but I knew that was the Holy Spirit speakin’ to me, and it scared me so much I never mistreated my wife again after that. An’ that’s that voice I’m talkin’ about.”

I did not pursue the issue any further. The important point is that such experiences, from participants’ point of view, validated their belief that there was a supernatural world to which they had at least partial access and which directly affected their lives. Such experience, as well, pushed ordinary society more to the background of their experience. Ordinary society was important mainly as the field in which the supernatural moved to affect their lives. There

---

21 Ralph did not elaborate on what he meant by “mistreating his wife,” and I did not ask for further details. As such, we need to be careful not to make any assumptions as to what was implied by this phrase.
seemed to be, for instance, little concern for national politics. At most, I once heard two participants complain about recently enacted federal tax cuts that did not seem to be lessening their financial burdens in any way. Instead, participants viewed ordinary society mainly as a proving ground where they battled Satan and his demons by devoting themselves to God.

Ontological liminality was demonstrated in much of the rhetoric of the Gospel Sing participants. Looking back at the quote at the beginning of Chapter 1, Ralph complained that the Devil had been strongly tempting him—in this case, he was referring to the temptation to lose his temper that particular week due to a buildup of frustration with certain family members. Bill often mentioned the urge, again credited to Satan, to return to drugs and alcohol. Other members commonly mentioned the temptation to fall into despair due to health problems or financial burdens, responding to such temptations by saying something along the lines of, “but the Lord’ll see me through it all.”

Turner observed in his studies that entrances into liminal experience “characteristically begin with the subject’s being symbolically killed or separated from ordinary secular or profane relationships, and conclude with symbolic birth or reincorporation into society” (Turner 1974: 53). Though there was no symbolic death in the ritual actions of the Gospel Sing, participants occasionally spoke of themselves as “dead to the world.” Interestingly, however, they also presented an inversion of death symbology, referring to themselves as “born again.” Whether “dead to the world” or “born again,” such remarks again reflected a sense of newly transformed being-ness. Upon their conversions, they no longer viewed themselves as beings primarily concerned with the world here-and-now, except to the extent that it affected their salvation. They now experienced themselves in a transitory state between this world and the next, where they were embattled by spiritual forces that perhaps worked through the things of this world but were not bound to it. At the same time, because ordinary society dimmed in comparison to the supernatural world experienced by the Gospel Sing participants, the constraints, directives, judgments and presumptions of ordinary society that had often stripped participants of their agency and worth no longer had the degree of power over their perceptions of themselves.

Such ontological liminality was further reflected in the lyrics to many of the songs they regularly sang. “Stand Toe to Toe with the Devil” warned participants that “Satan’s outa’ getcha’” and must be faced daily with prayer if they expected to make it to heaven. “Hallelujah, I’m Ready to Go” used the metaphor of a journey where, before salvation, participants were “on
the highway heading down below,” a reference to hell. With their identities then established as “saved,” participants proclaimed that they were “ready to go,” that is, ready to embark on the journey to heaven. “Ain’t No Grave” defied death—that most permanent, static, and non-liminal of states—claiming that physical death was only temporary and had no power to terminate the lives of the participants. “God on the Mountain” discussed the difficulties and dangers of life, warning participants that “it’s down in the valley” where “faith is put to the test,” while reminding them that God was still present with them. Similarly, “Further Along” also discussed the difficulties and dangers of life, but explicitly offered no explanation for the seeming injustice so often attributed to them except to say that “farther along”—again, the metaphor of a journey was used—such things would become known, that is, after Christ returned and offered a “mansion” to his followers. Here, then, the song pointed to a terminus to the ontological liminality of life, a permanent, stable residence forever free of difficulties and dangers. “I Can Still Go Free” was particularly interesting in that it spoke of entrance into liminality as a desired state provoked by salvation. Before salvation, participants recalled themselves as “imprisoned,” using non-liminal imagery to refer to themselves as victims and pawns of social structure. Ordinary society was viewed as a prison from whence, upon salvation, they believed themselves to be freed into a new world of possibilities.

Communitas and the Gospel Sing

Brotherly Love Ministries served as a tangible locus of the participants’ ontological liminality. Founded in protest to local church institutions, it was, indeed, constructed as a place of anti-structure. While the local church institutions had once rejected Ralph, it was he who now rejected them. Beyond his theological differences, he believed them to be confining and full of pretense in all their constricting formalities, for instance, requiring people to dress a certain way and to sing and perform music in a certain style with a certain degree of skill. He felt such criteria lacked relevance and intimacy, discouraging people, like himself, from worship that enabled people to celebrate in such a way that yielded positive transformative effects. In reaction, he sought to create a church that represented his vision of an ideal home, a place of

---

22 I should note that Ralph still spoke fondly of his former church despite his sharp disagreements with it.
casual comfort where participants were urged to dress as they like, eat as they like, converse as they like, and worship as they like. This was especially poignant in that many of the Gospel Sing participants had experienced a fracturing and fragmenting of their families and homes due to such factors as substance abuse, crime, marital infidelity, illness, and death. Through such acts as eating, praying, conversing, and performing music together, any hierarchical distinctions and barriers that might exist “out in the world” were dissolved as participants collectively recuperated a lost sense of family and home. The efficacy of the Gospel Sing depended on this dissolution of hierarchical distinctions and barriers, enabling participants to relate to one other as social equals. Who a participant was and what they did “out in the world” may be things they wished to address in the Gospel Sing, but it did not enter into any sort of qualification as to who enjoyed a superior status over whom. Thus, in its anti-structural dimensions, the Gospel Sing reflected the other essential concept in Turner’s rite of passage theory, the development of communitas. Such an atmosphere of communitas, Ralph believed, was necessary in cultivating an experience of celebration that would lead to positive personal transformation. Summarizing Turner, James W. Fernandez defines communitas as “that ‘irrefragible [sic] genuineness of mutuality’ (Turner 1969: 137); that undifferentiated experience of communion, equality, poverty, openness to the other; that recognition of the ‘essential and generic human bond’ that periodically occurs as an antistructural reaction to the hierarchical, differentiated and invidious relations of the structured everyday world” (Fernandez 1986: 178-79). Indeed, the Gospel Sing cultivated a sense of family—really, of brothers and sisters with only Ralph, as the founder and organizer, occupying a slightly higher status perhaps best described as “big brother.”

One evening, when there were fewer participants than usual, I asked Ralph if he worried about the lack of numbers. “No, man, I love it!” he replied. “I know everybody, and everybody knows me. I go to some of them bigger churches, and I just feel lost! Nobody knows nobody there! What’s the point? Here, it’s like family.” Sure enough, as I entered the church each Saturday evening, I almost always received a warm embrace from Ralph and others as they enthusiastically exclaimed, “Good to see you brother!” (after which, I was affectionately referred to by the nickname “Skeeball” on account of my near baldness). Other members usually referred to each other as “brother” and “sister” as well. Such a way of addressing one another, of

---

23 While it might deepen our appreciation to describe a few of these situations in greater detail, I have, for the sake of privacy, chosen to omit more detailed description except in cases where I was given explicit permission.

24 In fact, when I occasionally ran into Ralph around town, the greetings were much the same.
course, is common in many churches, but at Brotherly Love Ministries, there seemed to be more locutionary force behind these words. As stated, many of the participants had little other family in their lives. For one, most were in their mid-60s or older and had lost parents and, oftentimes, spouses and siblings. As well, many of the participants had never “settled down,” so to speak, and never married or raised children. Some who did have children had little contact with them. For them, the Gospel Sing was family.

Dinnertime played an especially important role in fostering communitas. This was often a time when participants revealed their personal lives to one another. When I asked Bill about his week, it was not uncommon for him to reply that his electricity had again been turned off because he could not afford to pay the bill. Interestingly enough, however, he never relayed such information in the manner of a complaint. Usually, he joked about it—“Hey, I wonder if I’ll have electricity this week!” he would say as he laughed. Another time, I asked Sister Lucy about her week. I knew that she drove a bus for the school district, which was not easy work for a woman in her mid to late 60s with various minor to moderate health problems. Now, she told me, she was also forced to work a night shift at the newly opened Super Wal-Mart in order to pay for additional medical expenses and support her ailing sister who was now living with her. Another participant regularly told me about her marriage difficulties. Indeed, the Gospel Sing encouraged people to let down their guard and reveal their inner lives to one another. When participants asked me how my week was, I would reply honestly if I were struggling with stress and anxiety due to schoolwork. Things did not have to “fine,” and indeed, such vulnerability was critical to the fostering of communitas. This is not to say that the majority of dinnertime conversation revolved around such hardships. Much of it was just simple conversation concerning the weather, fishing reports, the price of meat at Wal-Mart compared to Winn-Dixie, and so forth. Yet even in such seemingly trivial chitchat, the bonds between participants were strengthened.

What I found noteworthy, however, was how the spirit of communitas that was nurtured during dinnertime flowed over into worship. After eating for about a half hour or so, without any formal announcement, Ralph, Teresa, Bill, Carl, and perhaps one or two others would walk to the front and pick up their instruments and begin performing. Those still seated would not cease their conversations (though they would refrain from being too loud and disruptive). Yet, this did not seem to bother those performing in the least, for they sang and played for themselves.
and the other participants within the ensemble as much as they did those not performing. This is not to say that they merely provided background music—quite the opposite. While the other participants may not have ceased their conversations, they would intermittently stop to listen to a song they particularly enjoyed and found meaningful. After a few songs, Ralph would then invite others to come forward and perform. Again, conversation would continue on or cease in accordance with personal desires. The only time conversation completely ceased was during Ralph’s sermon, the one component of the Gospel Sing that directly connected to the worship of more regulated, formalized church services.

What was valued, then, was not conformation to a strict code of conduct regarding “proper” worship behavior. Instead, the Gospel Sing fostered communitas by encouraging relationship building throughout the service in accordance with the desires of individual participants. Non-performing participants were free to relate to the music as they liked, even if that meant allowing the music to lapse into the background as they turned their attention to their neighbor. I shy away from the term “informal” to describe such processes, for the Gospel Sing was a ritualized event that depended on certain strategic schemes or processes for it to function effectively. Communitas was not fostered by a vague notion of informality, but by its resistance to social structure, enacted through a strategy of “casualization.” Such a strategy promoted communitas by lessening the various behavioral strictures that the participants associated with other churches, allowing them to more freely, directly and openly engage with one another.

Of course, this is not to deny that there were significant governing social expectations that were necessary in order to foster a sense of the ideal home. In order to cultivate communitas, such non-explicit regulations were necessary. In all the encouragement to “be as you like,” participants necessarily needed “to like” similar things in order for the Gospel Sing to function efficaciously. For instance, they needed to be polite and generous to one another, though there was a certain acceptable level of teasing (indeed, teasing was an important means of creating comfort, familiarity, intimacy and a sense of home). They also needed to share a similar faith, and though, such as in my case, they tolerated belief differences, the Gospel Sing functioned most efficaciously for those who shared very similar beliefs, especially concerning salvation. Finally, of course, they needed to share a familiarity and common appreciation of a
certain culturally-informed style of music: Southern Gospel. This was music that most had grown up with and were deeply connected to, and as such, it was music that deeply connected them to one another. The Gospel Sing was certainly not a free-for-all.

Early on, certain participants either refused to concede to the purposes set forth by Ralph for his church or misunderstood his intentions. Some came for the opportunity to promote themselves, while others came simply for the entertainment. However such motives might be judged, that a desire to foster community was not chief among them threatened to undermine Ralph’s vision. Others may have attended for the fellowship—that is, to foster community—but did not share similar enough beliefs. They were not explicitly discouraged from participating but nevertheless stopped attending, apparently due to tiring of the constant, overriding proclamation of the beliefs of Ralph and other likeminded participants. In any case, attendance eventually was distilled to about ten to twenty regular participants who shared enough in common to begin creating a sense of home.

Self-Empowerment through the Creation of Celebration

Brotherly Love Ministries’ Gospel Sing service was ritually constructed to encourage an intimate, unified community of similar beliefs and shared feelings. However, it would be an oversimplification to stop there. According to Catherine Bell:

The ultimate purpose of ritualization is neither the immediate goals avowed by the community or the officiant nor the more abstract functions of social solidarity and conflict resolution: it is nothing other than the production of ritualized agents, persons who have an instinctive knowledge of these schemes embedded in their bodies, in their sense of reality, and in their understanding of how to act in ways that both maintain and qualify the complex micorelations of power. Such practical knowledge is not an

---

25 I never observed nor tested this myself, but I suspect that a performance in another style of music would be politely appreciated, as long the musical selection was explicitly evangelical in its content. The participants would likely celebrate the performer’s Christian devotion, especially if the performer clearly sought to contribute to a sense of community. At the same time, I suspect that the other participants would soon desire a greater proportion of the service given over to Southern Gospel.

26 Every third Sunday of each month, the Gospel Sing would consist entirely of music. Ralph would not preach. On these nights, attendance often swelled to about twenty-five participants or more.
inflexible set of assumptions, beliefs, and body postures; rather, it is the ability to deploy, play, and manipulate basic schemes in ways that appropriate and condition experience effectively. It is a mastery that experiences itself as relatively empowered, not as conditioned or molded (Bell 1992: 221).

Bell goes beyond equating ritual with the purposes of social control. Instead, she seeks the greater purposes of such ritualized schemes of social control, concluding that their purpose is to provide consenting individuals with a sense of power over their experiences. Indeed, the reason they consent to the ritual in the first place is the potentiality to attain such power. Those who threaten to undermine this potentiality are strategically, if not explicitly, denied full participation to the point where their power over the ritual is diminished and ineffectualized. Eventually, due to the denial of meaning they would have for the ritual, they refuse to consent and, unless forced to do otherwise, leave. Similarly, a desire for self-empowerment through certain beliefs and a certain context and way of performing was what drove the Gospel Sing.

The musical performance component of the Gospel Sing could be characterized as casual, with few “rules” other than conformity to a certain musical style and repertoire. Instead, what was most valued was participation. Little emphasis was placed on ability, providing those of lesser skill a nurturing environment for musical expression. If a person’s skill level was such that co-participation with other performers was overly challenging, that person was nevertheless encouraged to perform, though perhaps alone or with Ralph providing simple accompaniment. Of course, this applied mostly to instrumentalists who, in learning chord changes and other technical elements, had trouble keeping steady time well enough to coordinate with the other musicians. Whatever the case, performers were enabled to create music that was personally meaningful. At the conclusions of performances, they were applauded, encouraged, appreciated, and asked to perform again. In short, they were made to feel valued.

My description of performances by Bill and Richard exemplify this. Sister Lucy’s performance provides another example. She decried her lack of singing ability. Where she developed the idea that she was a poor singer is anyone’s guess, but as a participant in the Gospel Sing, she was told how much her singing was appreciated. I, too, often enjoyed accompanying on electric keyboard, though I am far from a trained pianist. I could hammer out the chord changes well enough to stay in time, but a great source of fun was in learning to
improvise in a stylistically conventional way. Even when I made mistakes, I was told to “keep going, you’re doing great!”

Conclusion

The great potentiality of the Gospel Sing was in the opportunity it provided participants to create for themselves an experience of celebration. While the impetus for celebration resided in their salvationist belief, the Gospel Sing allowed them to experience that salvation on their own terms.

Such freedom to experiment reflects an important theme of play in Gospel Sing. In his study of an “old-time musical community” in Tallahassee, Florida, Trevor Harvey notes in rituals of “informal music making” that “the concept of play is of vital importance in processes of meaning-making and the construction of an idealized musical and social community” (Harvey 2006: 57). Further nuancing this, he draws from Jacques Attali, who states that “music is a play of mirrors in which every activity is reflected, defined, recorded, and distorted” (Attali 1985: 5, cited in Harvey 2006: 57). Harvey then goes on to state that, “The mirror, rather than projecting any ‘actual’ or ‘real’ social experience provides an idealized image, a distortion of the real thing. Within the process of informal musicking, the playing of tunes...allows for the participants to project their own image of an idealized society—they play with ideas of how they perceive things ought to be” (Harvey 2006: 58). Similarly, musical performance in the Gospel Sing also modeled the ideal community that its participants intended to realize. Participation was encouraged, no matter what a participant’s musical ability might be, which in turn implied the message that each person present had something valuable to contribute to the community.

However, such a perspective is somewhat problematic in that there is a detachment of ritual from “reality,” when, in fact, the ritual itself may be “the reality.” The Gospel Sing participants did not only manipulate “symbols of reality” in the hopes of deriving lessons or long-lasting effects that would somehow carry over into their everyday lives. They were directly transforming their realities in the moment of musical performance, creating an idealized community before them just as they were altering their own inner experiences. The Gospel Sing’s main purpose was not simply to construct a community of solidarity characterized by an
environment of equality, freedom, closeness, and acceptance, insofar as such was perceived by participants. This community was constructed for the larger purpose of enabling participants to create an experience of celebration, empowering them with the ability to make their own joy.

I would close here on a personal note. Throughout this project, I was often confronted with rather strong belief differences between myself and the other participants at Brotherly Love Ministries. However, I also discovered that through the process of “knowing of people making music,” I too was able to partake in the experience of communitas. I found that as those who were initially unknown to me became more known, there evolved amidst ourselves and sense of commonality and kinship, not through the ignoring of belief differences, but through the acknowledging of their rootedness in the human experience and the capacity of this experience to evoke feelings that transcend the Self/Other barrier. As a scholar, such experience resonates with Stephen Tyler’s notion of ethnography as a sort of meditation in which we discover the “other as us” (Tyler 1986: 128-129). When we do cast the people of our study as “the other” (and does not all ethnography, to some extent, invariably do so?), we are assuming difference in relief to ourselves, and in so doing, professing our own identities just as we are constructing the identities of the people we study. My hope is that the reader has approached my work with a similar spirit.
REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jason McCoy received his B.M. (1998) and M.M. (2003) in Music Composition from the University of Southern California, where he studied with Morten Lauridsen, Erica Muhl, and James Hopkins. While remaining active as a composer, he is currently pursuing his Ph.D. in Musicology (Ethnomusicology) at The Florida State University.