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We'll Cry Glory: The presence of religion in popular music

ABSTRACT

I examine the Oscar-winning song Glory, by Common and John Legend, and argue that their use of musical elements characteristic of gospel music represents a deliberate attempt to situate it within this (sacred) music tradition. I suggest that the composers' intent was to situate the political message of the song in a broader historical context of African-American liberative struggle, and that this religious presence demonstrates the continued relevance of America's religious history to contemporary politics and popular culture.

KEYWORDS

Religion
African-
American history
Musicology

INTRODUCTION

2014 bore witness to the deaths of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida. In both cases, a young African American was fatally shot by a person in uniform, resulting in riots in Ferguson, mass protests and a murder trial in Sanford, and accusations of institutional racism and hostility towards African Americans by law enforcement in the United States. 2014 also saw the release of *Selma* (DuVernay 2014), the Academy Award-winning historical drama about Martin Luther King and the voting rights marches in Selma, Alabama. I argue that this film, and particularly its theme song *Glory* (Stephens et al. 2014), seeks to connect this historical struggle for civil rights with the contemporary struggle of African Americans in Ferguson, Sanford, and beyond.

I demonstrate this through an analysis of the song *Glory* with reference to a particular tradition of sacred music, African-American gospel. *Glory* contains musical elements strongly tying it to the gospel tradition, which I suggest are employed to evoke the religious history of African-American political struggle, and to contextualise the events of the film and 2014's killings in this historical struggle. The message of *Glory* is one of continuity: that the struggle for civil rights in America that began in the antebellum period, continues today, and that this struggle is codified in the historical development of African-American religion and

therefore African-American sacred music. By drawing on musical characteristics typical of gospel music, *Glory*'s composers are able to evoke this political and religious history.

African-American sacred music exists on a historical continuum that reflects the interaction between tradition and new environmental stimuli, primarily the changing religious context in which music is created and experienced (Jackson 1995: 186). The introduction of new musical elements to African-American sacred music by these changing environmental stimuli results in a "coding" of those conditions within the music itself, resulting in distinctive musical characteristics that reflect its historical development. Religion in America has historically been a battlefield of liberative struggle for African Americans, from the early days of slavery through to the civil rights movement of the twentieth century and beyond, and this historical struggle is coded into African-American sacred music. It is this historical and ongoing struggle that *Glory*'s composers seek to evoke in their work.

THE PRESENCE OF RELIGION IN 'GLORY'

Glory relates the 2014 Ferguson unrest to the civil rights movement of Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr. and proclaims that 'justice for all just ain't specific enough.' Beyond this explicitly political message, the role of religion in the ongoing struggle for African-American rights is also acknowledged in the line 'freedom is like religion to us,' and in the musical elements used throughout the song that reference the historical development of the African-American church and its particular sacred song tradition (Weekes 2005). In this section I will discuss some of these musical characteristics and their gospel origins to demonstrate how the song's composers have used them to make the history of the African-American church present in the work.

Melodically *Glory* is largely based on the minor pentatonic scale, an element that had its genesis in West African sacred music traditions before becoming characteristic of early spirituals (Southern 1983: 16). The chorus melody and performer Legend's free vocalisations both utilise the notes of the pentatonic scale:

The image shows a musical score for the chorus of 'Glory'. It features a single staff in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The melody is written in a style that incorporates the minor pentatonic scale. Above the staff, chord symbols are placed: Am, F, C/E, F, and G. Below the staff, the lyrics are written with some blank lines for vocalisation: 'One day, ___ when the glo-ry comes, it will be ours, ___ it will be ___ ours. Oh ___'. The melody consists of eighth and quarter notes, with some rests and ties.

Figure 1: *Glory*'s chorus.

The harmonic progression of the chorus, vi-IV-I-V, is typical of popular music (it is a variation of the classic Beatles' *Let It Be* [Lennon-McCartney 1970] progression). To this, Legend consistently adds an (occasionally syncopated) IV chord following the I. The I-IV movement is characteristic of gospel music, particularly the "shout" vamps used during Pentecostal infusion of the Holy Spirit (Williams-Jones 1975: 379). On all instances of the IV chord Legend prominently sings the major 7th of that chord, extending the harmony to suggest the jazz influence of post-Dorsey gospel (Jackson 1995, Marini 2003, Weekes 2005):

Am F C/E F G

One day, ___ when the glo - ry comes, it will be ours, ___ it will be ___ ours. Oh ___

Figure 2: implied maj7 harmonies.

The dominant or flattened 7th might be more typical of gospel melodies, a characteristic taken from the barbershop influence of the Fisk Jubilee Singers (Marini 2003: 111). Legend's major 7th might be seen as something of a compromise between the true gospel 7th and pop aesthetics (as the dominant 7th would sound slightly harsh or jarring).

Another element characteristic of gospel music, featured heavily in *Glory*, is the call-and-response in three-part close harmony:

Am F C/E F G

Glo - ry ___ Oh ___

Glo - ry! Glo - ry! Glo - ry! Glo - ry!

Figure 3: call-and-response in close harmony.

Glory's bridge also uses the call-and-response element, this time with more elaborate vocalisations:

The musical score consists of two staves. The top staff is a vocal line in treble clef with lyrics: "We'll cry glo-ry! Oh, glo-ry! Oh_____ hoo hoo_____". Above the notes are chords: Dm, C/E, F, Am, and G. A "falsetto" marking with a circled 'o' is above the "Oh" note. The bottom staff is a piano accompaniment in treble clef with lyrics: "Glo-ry! Glo-ry! Glo-ry! Glo-ry!". The accompaniment features block chords corresponding to the vocal line.

Figure 4: *Glory's* bridge.

The call-and-response of the phrase 'we'll cry glory' suggests, as did defiant spirituals in the vein of *You May Bury Me in the East/I'll Hear the Trumpet Sound*, a certain degree of exhortation: the leader promises glory and the congregation enthusiastically responds in a manner reminiscent both of a worship service and a call to arms. Many early spirituals contained hopeful, almost prophetic lyrics of this sort that promised a better tomorrow for an oppressed people, and *Glory* likewise promises a future in which glory – honour, dignity, respect – is possessed by African Americans (Williams-Jones 1975, Bowman 2001, Hopkins 2003). Legend's use of the falsetto register in this section recalls the extended vocal technique and improvisation of early twentieth century quartet soloists (Marini 2003: 118). Religion is specifically referenced throughout the song. The liberative struggle of African Americans is related to religious narratives:

'One Son died, his spirit is revisiting us/truant living, living in us/resistance is us/that's why Rosa sat on the bus/that's why we walk through Ferguson with our hands up.'

The 'Son' who died and yet is 'revisiting' and 'living in us' we can infer to be Jesus, who is believed to have been resurrected after His death, and lives on in his followers through His Holy Spirit. The presence of the Holy Spirit in everyday life is the cornerstone of evangelical faith (including the Baptist Church of King), and this lyric gives the Spirit 'living in us' as the reason that African Americans participate in liberative struggles, from the 1960s civil rights movement up until the present day. This point is reinforced through the central concept of

'Glory' itself. Legend introduces this at the beginning of the song as a promise of what will come from the liberative struggle, but Common concludes by rapping:

*'Welcome to the story we call victory/the coming of the Lord, my eyes
have seen the Glory.'*

Here 'Glory' is given a double meaning as both conclusion of African-American liberative struggle and second coming of Christ, conflating two promises of equality and salvation. This contextualisation of African-American experience in religious narrative is characteristic of sacred music from the spiritual onwards, and Common and Legend employ the same technique in *Glory* (Jackson 1995: 188). The last line is also a play on the famous opening of the *Battle Hymn of the Republic*: 'my eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.' This line also closed King's final sermon before his assassination, and so again strongly relates the struggle depicted in *Selma* with African-American religion.

These musical elements are characteristic of gospel music and clearly identify the song with that genre. More generally, they also serve to identify the subject matter of the song, King's civil rights movement and the Ferguson protests, with the African-American church, the history of which is codified in the musical characteristics of gospel.

WHY CRY GLORY?

Employing musical elements characteristic of gospel music situates the political message of *Glory* in the broader historical context of African-American liberative struggle, in which Christianity played a prominent role. This makes the powerful statement that this struggle, which begun in the antebellum period, still continues today, and that religion remains a significant battlefield of this struggle.

Glory was written for the movie *Selma*, which focusses on Martin Luther King Jr. during the 1960s civil rights movement, but the song anachronistically references the 2014 Ferguson unrest. The unrest was sparked by the shooting of Michael Brown by a white police officer on August 9th, and the subsequent decision by a grand jury to not indict the officer. This incident inflamed racial tensions in Ferguson, whose African-American community were already under duress due to the institutionalised racism in the predominantly white police department (Lowery et al. 2014).

By relating Ferguson to the civil rights movement of the 1960s, Common and Legend are claiming that the struggle of African Americans to end racial segregation and institutionalised discrimination is ongoing, despite the legal and political victories of the 1960s movement. Hall refers to this as the ‘long civil rights movement,’ acknowledging that ‘despite the movement’s undeniable triumphs, those evils [of white privilege and institutionalised racism] persist and in some ways have been compounded’ (2005: 1261). Ferguson and Selma, according to *Glory*, are both part of this same long movement.

Hall considers this long movement, and the institutions that it opposes, to have its origins in antebellum slavery and the emancipation movement. Religion was a significant battlefield of this early period, and this struggle became encoded in the music tradition that arose out of slave religion. Religion was used as a tool of repression by slaveowners, anti-abolitionists, and segregationists; as a reprieve from the injustice of the world by Africans and African Americans under slavery and segregation; and finally as a source of resistance against that injustice. It is this tradition of conflicting religious interpretation in the long civil rights movement that Legend and Common are evoking through their use of gospel elements in *Glory*.

Religion was first introduced to African slaves in America as a tool for pacification that promised eternal reward for submission to the conditions of the material world (Fountain 2005). Slaveholders systematically indoctrinated African Americans with a brand of Christianity that focused on passages like Ephesians 6:5-8: ‘Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ ... knowing that whatever good we do we will receive the same again from the Lord whether we are slaves or free’ (Harvey and Blum 2012: 11). Even Nat Turner, leader of one of the most notoriously violent slave rebellions of the nineteenth century, accepted this pro-slavery reading of Christianity in his early life, quoting Luke 12:47: ‘he who knoweth his Master’s will, and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes, and thus I have chastened you’ (cited in Baker 2006: 187). As late as the nineteenth century, anti-abolitionists continued to justify slavery on the grounds that Abraham, Moses, Paul, and even Jesus himself either ‘took the existence of slavery for granted or made no obvious moves to eliminate it’ (Noll 2008: 33).

Despite these intentions, the Protestant religion also gave solace and new hope to a people who desperately needed it. Christian beliefs were contextualised in the African-experience, leading to the historic declaration of Bishop Henry McNeal Turner in 1898: ‘God is a Negro!’ (cited in Harvey and Blum 2012: 9). Hopkins claims that the ‘illegal and hidden

religious practices' of African slaves formed 'a unique and coherent understanding of Christianity' that contextualised the slave narratives in 'their own language and idiom' (2003: 1-2). This adaptation of European Christianity to the African-American experience provided slaves with 'an idea of humanity and spirituality that was necessary to endure enslavement ... [and] a moral weapon of judgement whereby slaves could evaluate their masters' (Blum 2012: 218). Evangelical Protestantism offered a direct avenue to God that bypassed all intermediaries – masters, slavers, and overseers for the African American as surely as it did 'priests, bishops and kings' for white Americans (Moore Jr. 1971: 661). Protestant religion, and particularly sacred songs 'reminded them [African Americans] of their homelands and sustained them in separation and captivity' (Bowman 2001: 209).

Protestantism also provided a spiritual and theological basis for African-American liberative struggles. Akinyela (2003) argues that the spread of Christianity unified ethnic identity as African Americans (echoing the earlier conclusions of Frey and Wood [1998]), and served as 'a primary source of the logic of Black resistance and resilience.' Black religion as an emancipatory ideology continued into the civil rights campaigns of the twentieth century, with 'prophetic religion ... as the heart and soul of the civil rights crusade' (Blum 2012: 229). Gary Marx's famous study (1967) concluded that religious involvement was for the most part inversely related to political activism during the 1950s and 60s, but subsequent evaluations with stricter controls (Nelsen et al. 1975, Hunt and Hunt 1977, Mattis 2001) found no such inverse relationship. Indeed, Booker's (2014) review of scholarship on the role of religion in the civil rights movement concludes that politics was a central concern of African-American religious communities as they sought to 'carve out political and legal space to practice their beliefs.' As one participant in Williams' (2003: 115) study replied, 'black folks began to say our theology is not to look for justice in the by and by but to look for justice right now' (see also Wilmore 1998, Williams 2002, Chappell 2002, Dickerson 2005).

Christianity was originally introduced to slaves as a pacifying mechanism, but its multivalency allowed for reinterpretation and reconstruction as a source of strength throughout, and ultimately as a foundation for, their struggle against oppression (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). William Du Bois' *Souls of Black Folk* argues that while 'American systems of slavery, racism and economic exploitation had almost crushed their souls ... African Americans valiantly fought back, [linking] political rights with faith in God ... [and creating] sacred songs to articulate their deepest feelings' (cited in Blum 2012: 213). African-

American religion has been a battlefield for the rights of an oppressed people, with interpretation of the religion itself paralleling interpretation of the place of that people in America. All of this is reflected in the historical development of gospel music, a legacy drawn on in *Glory* for political and dramatic effect.

CONCLUSIONS

Glory uses musical elements characteristic enough of gospel music to place it in that sacred music tradition, evoking the religious history of African-American liberative struggle. The presence of religion in the song serves to link the primary subject of *Glory* – the 1960s civil rights movement – with Hall’s “long movement” of liberative struggle beginning in the antebellum period and continuing today. Religion’s role in this struggle is made present in *Glory* through musical “coding” that serves to contextualise the lyrical content of the song itself in this broader history. This demonstrates the continued relevance of America’s religious past to contemporary society and politics.

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