

Island Gospel: Pentecostal Music and Identity in Jamaica and the United States

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Melvin L. Butler

Island Gospel: Pentecostal Music and Identity in Jamaica and the United States

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In *Island Gospel*, ethnomusicologist Melvin L. Butler powerfully explores religious and cultural identity in Jamaican Pentecostalism through the lens of music and flow, generatively contributing to a growing body of research on Pentecostalism in the profoundly transmigratory space of the Caribbean. Throughout, Butler compellingly uses “flow” as an abundant, multifaceted heuristic device and metaphor to critically unearth the ways Jamaican Pentecostals navigate ascetic ideals of “perfecting holiness” (44), or striving to walk the path of a “consecrated life” through the rejection of “worldliness” (75, 57), amid the powerful pull of Jamaican cultural nationalism and religious imbrication with the United States. For Butler, the musics that circulate between Jamaica and the United States—from sacred African American gospel and country and western to secular Jamaican ska, reggae, and dancehall—serve as sites for the assertion and contestation of Pentecostal ideals of sanctified living in worship and everyday life. Music thus acts as “an efficient conveyor of theological meaning, as well as a sonic marker of the shifting boundaries between holiness and worldliness” (57) for Jamaican Pentecostals. Butler’s unique emphasis on Jamaican cultural identity as an inextricable facet of practitioners’ daily striving for holiness as “saints” (2) underscores the centrality of translocally informed identities and the complex navigation of the local and the global for Jamaican practitioners. Butler’s assertion that Jamaican Pentecostals “care deeply about identity” (151) knowingly

(re)mobilizes identity as a viable category of academic analysis and an urgently relevant facet of lived experience.

Through his rich own ethnographic and personal positioning as an “African American scholar of faith” (11), Butler also revealingly explores Jamaican Pentecostalism in relation to his own identity and experiences in U.S. Black American Pentecostal churches in Brooklyn and in Jamaican congregations on the island. For Butler, the most riveting revelations of fieldwork emerge in and through moments of personal spiritual insight: “It was as a Pentecostal that I found myself most engaged in our topic” (73), Butler recalls of a conversation with a female pastor, Hermine Bryan, in Riversdale, Jamaica. Through careful insertion of the self in academic narrative, Butler underscores the rich potentiality of ethnography at the intersections of personal faith and academic encounter. At the same time, Butler narrates his own, at times challenging experiences navigating the divergent academic and theological epistemes of research and Christian faith, fruitfully unearthing the code switching required of ethnographers, as well as the personal discomforts and joyous revelations these navigations may engender.

Butler begins with a chapter on the “boundaries and flows” of music between Jamaican Pentecostal churches on the island and his own experiences attending U.S. Pentecostal churches in New York. In Jamaica, critically, Pentecostal practice is inflected by the presence of Pentecostalism in the United States. In the church that

Butler himself attends in Brooklyn, meanwhile, practitioners witness the palpable musical and migratory flows of Jamaican immigrants on African American-majority congregations in New York. Here is ever inflected with there, as Butler deftly demonstrates via layered, multi-sited ethnography.

Throughout the case studies that follow, Butler generatively moves beyond the “well-worn” academic formulations of flow (for example, “*cultural flow*” and “*migratory flow*” [6] modeled upon Arjun Appadurai’s notion of global -scapes; see Appadurai 1996: 12) to provocatively interrogate the embodied phenomenology of Pentecostal ideals of receptivity in relation to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s formulation of flow as “optimal experience” (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). This perhaps unexpected epistemological turn toward flow in relation to secular formulations of optimal productivity and performance in psychology unearths a novel and compelling lens through which to explore Pentecostal spiritual ideals of embodied receptivity, particularly as these relate to the concept of “the anointing.” As Butler demonstrates, multivalent discourses surrounding the anointing in Jamaican Pentecostalism mobilize the biblical metaphor of oil, “a biblical trope symbolizing the presence and power of the Holy Spirit” (74), as a means to highlight embodied readiness (via “oil” that “lubricates”) to God and the Holy Spirit. Here, Butler harnesses Csikszentmihalyi’s formulation to explore the phenomenological ideal of Pentecostal embodied receptivity as “*spiritual flow*” (6). Csikszentmihalyi’s notion of flow then serves as a heuristic tool to engage the ways Jamaican Pentecostals mobilize and receive translocal musical styles—both “Jamaican”

and “American” (a porous distinction, as Butler delineates)—as holy conduits or worldly impediments to optimal religious experience and channeling. For Butler, “the transmigration of church music” (152) between Jamaican, African American, and white U.S. American congregations and the heterogeneous ways in which individual practitioners approach musical style offer a core means to explore the intricate nexus of identity and ideals of sanctification for Jamaican practitioners. Drawing on Gerardo Marti (2012), Butler interrogates the tensions in Pentecostals’ heterogeneous assertions of “religious ethnicity,” or the ways that practitioners “use music to express ‘pan-ethnic,’ ‘ethnic-specific,’ and ‘ethnic transcendent’ transnational identities” in their complex navigations of sanctified life (126). Fortunately, Butler accomplishes this with a generative eye toward the heterogeneity of individual and community perspectives on the relationality of music, ethnicity, religion, and nation. “The human beings within this world are every bit as complicated as those outside of it,” Butler emphasizes. “They modify their beliefs and musical practices, they adapt to varying local and global circumstances, and they change their minds about things” (xiii).

In a broad sense, *Island Gospel* powerfully builds upon studies of Pentecostalism and evangelical Christianity in Jamaica, the Caribbean, and their attendant diasporas (Brodwin 2003; Corten and Marshall-Fratani 2001; Thornton 2016; Rodriguez Toulis 2020) by underscoring the centrality of music to the lived experience of Christian and evangelical life (Beckford 2006; McAlister 2012; Rommen 2007). Butler’s perspective at the critical interstices of African American Christian insider and Jamaican outsider also powerfully mobilizes

“an orientation to black Christianity” that foregrounds the ways “commitment to a holy lifestyle allows . . . saints to take ownership of power” (77). As such, Butler’s ethnography emerges from within a perspective of religious sincerity, foregrounding the ways that Jamaican Pentecostals strive to craft a sense of aligned religious identity—or “at-homeness” (40)—at the intersections of musical style and commitment to a sanctified life. In relation to recent studies, Butler’s analysis also notably deemphasizes discussions of Pentecostal performativity, or the ways that outward-facing performances of sanctification may confer heightened forms of social status or “respect” otherwise difficult to attain, an aspect of Pentecostalism explored more robustly by other scholars of Latin America, the Caribbean, and their attendant diasporas (see Thornton 2016; also, Austin-Broos 1997; Brodwin 2003; Burdick 1998; Toulis 1997; Wedenoja 1980). Additionally, Butler frames Pentecostalism as overwhelmingly discursively antithetical to other forms of local, and particularly African-inspired, practices such as Rastafarianism, a divergence from recent scholarship pointing to the potential for ontological agreement

and the sharing of practices between Pentecostalism, other forms of Christianity, and African-inspired religions such as vodú in the space of the Caribbean (see Thornton 2016). Butler’s note that “the sound of Revivalist or Rasta music is sometimes experienced as a positive attribute of a belief system otherwise viewed as spiritually unhealthy” (42), as well as some saints’ lamentations that Rastafarianism is framed so negatively within the Pentecostal church (38), point to the potential for further inquiry into the possibility of unearthed forms of ontological convergence and/or shared practice between Pentecostalism and other local secular institutions and sacred practices, particularly given the weight of entrenched U.S. and Western perspectives on religious difference (Thornton 2016; Peel 2016). Within and beyond the spaces of the Caribbean and the United States, Butler’s study powerfully succeeds in highlighting the complex and intricate ways that music flows and contributes to ritual “flow” for religious practitioners globally.

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