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Randall Stephens, Northumbria University

“Where else did they copy their styles but from church groups?”
Rock ‘n’ Roll and Pentecostalism in the 1950s South

Elvis wore a red jacket, black shirt and pants, a silver belt glittering with rhinestones, and a yellow tie. It was October 1957 and the star was about to take the stage at the Pan-Pacific auditorium in Los Angeles. Thousands of fans waited, screaming. Amid the chaos and noise, Elvis made time for a reporter from a teen magazine called *Dig*. His loud outfit and gravity-defying coif contrasted with his humble, polite responses. The reporter wondered how “the reputed King of Rock ‘n’ Roll” felt about Frank Sinatra’s comments that rock fans were just a bunch of “cretinous goons,” and rock was “the martial music of every side-burned delinquent on the face of the earth”? “He has a right to his opinion,” Elvis replied, “but I can’t see him knocking it for no good reason. I wouldn’t knock Frank Sinatra. I like him very much.” Then asked why he gyrated on stage, Elvis said that he didn’t really think about his movements. “I just sing like they do back home,” he commented. “When I was younger, I always liked spiritual quartets and they sing like that.”¹ As usual, Elvis, as with so many other first generation rock and rollers, looked back with fondness on his pentecostal upbringing and the gospel quartets that inspired him.

Regardless of such connections, in the popular imagination, and even among scholars, a chasm still supposedly separates rock and Christianity. The widespread preaching against rock, which first began in earnest when rock broke onto the national scene in the mid-1950s, added greatly to the idea that rock had nothing to do with Christianity in general or evangelicalism and pentecostalism in particular. Certainly, scholars have paid great attention

¹ Dolores Diamond interview with Elvis Presley, “Presley,” *Dig Magazine* (June 1958): 8, 10. Special thanks to my research assistants, Austin Steelman and Katie Brinegar.

to the impact of gospel music on rock, but the more specific religious/cultural roots of rock remain mostly unexplored.²

This article, then, examines how the culture of southern pentecostalism influenced early rock ‘n’ roll and helped give birth to the new genre. That religious stream was certainly just one of many that fed into the larger river of rock ‘n’ roll. Nonetheless, it was an important tributary. This article also looks into the burning controversies, inside and outside churches, surrounding the new musical hybrid. A series of questions drive the argument: How did pentecostalism shape first-generation performers like Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, Little Richard, Jerry Lee Lewis, and others? Even before the new music made big news and created such a stir, church leaders and laypeople argued about the relationship of popular music to church music. When performers like Ray Charles or Jerry Lee Lewis borrowed from sacred tunes for their recordings and performances, it only confirmed the worst suspicions of black and white believers. Why did rock ‘n’ roll so exercise the faithful in the South? This exploration also reexamines the supposed boundaries that exist between religion and non-religion, sacred and profane, something that scholars have focused on in recent years.³ This article finally asks what it means to be religious or to be influenced by religious

² Davin Seay and Mary Neely, *Stairway to Heaven: The Spiritual Roots of Rock ‘n’ Roll* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1986); Teresa L. Reed, *The Holy Profane: Religion in Black Popular Music* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2003); Gene Santoro, *Highway 61 Revisited: The Tangled Roots of Jazz, Blues, Rock, and Country Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 93-98. In its first stage rock and roll might best be defined as singles-based, black-rooted, mostly vocal music, found on the rhythm and blues as well as country and western charts. See, Charlie Gillett, *The Sound of the City: The Rise of Rock and Roll* (New York: Pantheon, 1983), viii- xii; and Dave Marsh, *The Heart of Rock and Soul: The 1001 Greatest Singles Ever Mad* (New York: Penguin, 1989), xv-xvi.

³ Charles Reagan Wilson, “‘Just a Little Talk with Jesus’: Elvis Presley, Religious Music, and Southern Spirituality,” in *Southern Crossroads: Perspectives on Religion and Culture*, eds., Walter H. Conser Jr. and Rodger M. Payne (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press,

practice. The American South, a region that consistently ranked as the most conventionally religious section of the country, is a good place to answer such questions.⁴

In 1960 Flannery O'Connor, the South's most famous Catholic writer, and a keen observer of southern zeal, remarked: "I think it is safe to say that while the South is hardly Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted."⁵ As a Catholic, O'Connor belonged to a minority in the religious region where Catholics, Jews, and non-evangelical Christians had a very small presence. Indeed, since the early 19th century, black and white evangelical Christianity had dominated below the Mason Dixon Line. Evangelicals tended to emphasize the born-again experience, the workings of God in daily life, the perils of the Devil and sin, the importance of church attendance, the reality of hell, biblical literalism, and strict moral codes.⁶ By the early 20th century, all the major pentecostal churches in America were headquartered in the South, although Baptists and Methodists claimed the largest share of

2008), 16-18. Craig Mosher, "Ecstatic Sounds: The Influence of Pentecostalism on Rock and Roll," *Popular Music and Society* 31:1 (February 2008): 95-112; Martha Bayles, *Hole in Our Soul: The Loss of Beauty and Meaning in American Popular Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 127-142; and Stephen R. Tucker, "Pentecostalism and Popular Culture in the South: A Study of Four Musicians," *Journal of Popular Culture* 16 (Winter 1982): 68-78. On religion, pop culture, and secularism, see, David Chidester, "The Church of Baseball, the Fetish of Coca-Cola, and the Potlatch of Rock 'n' Roll: Theoretical Models for the Study of Religion in American Popular Culture," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64:4 (1996): 743-765; Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Kathryn Lofton, *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); and "Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age," http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/secular_age/ (accessed 4/4/2012).

⁴ "U.S. Religious Landscape Survey: Religious Beliefs and Practices," www.religions.pewforum.org/reports, 2008 (accessed 9/2/2010).

⁵ Flannery O'Connor, "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction," in *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, eds., Sally Fitzgerald and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), 44.

⁶ For a clear, detailed definition of evangelicalism, see James Davidson Hunter, *Evangelicalism: Conservative Religion and the Quandary of Modernity* (Rutgers: Rutgers University Press, 1983), 7-9.

believers in the region. In 1950 two of the country's largest protestant denominations, the white Southern Baptist Convention and the black National Baptist Convention, boasted over 7 million and 4 million members respectively.⁷ The majority of their adherents resided in the former Confederacy. The South was, and still is, the most homogenous religious region in the country.⁸

In the middle decades of the 20th century pentecostalism was a relatively new offshoot of evangelicalism. It grew out of the holiness movement of the late 19th century. Holiness people, many of them former Methodists, looked to key passages of scripture and the writings of John Wesley and proclaimed that believers could be *sanctified*, living holy lives, unburdened by sin. Holiness shared some of its optimism with other Victorian movements of spiritual abundance or limitless divine potential, including Christian Science and mind cure, but holiness people additionally stressed heart purity and a strict life of obedience to God. Preachers often targeted lax mainliners for allowing card playing, theater attendance, or even dancing. Such secular amusements, deceptively harmless, led straight to hell, they warned. Critics thought the exuberant, overzealous holiness folk went too far. Mark Twain aimed his satire sights on the most famous southern holiness preacher of the Gilded Age. The Georgia revivalist Sam Jones, wrote Twain in an unpublished 1891 short story, was an unbearable ignoramus. The story followed the preacher's trip to heaven aboard a celestial train. Jones hollered "hosannahs like a demon" and was scolded by St. Peter. The

⁷ George F. Ketcham, ed., *Yearbook of American Churches* (New York: National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA, 1951), 234.

⁸ Bret E Carroll, *The Routledge Historical Atlas of Religion in America* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 115.

evangelist made a complete nuisance of himself in paradise, “preaching and exhorting and carrying on all the time” until “even the papal Borgias were revolted.”⁹

Following the mass-meetings of Jones and the spread of holiness, pentecostalism first took root in the American West and the American South in the first years of the century. A protracted interracial revival in Los Angeles, which erupted in April 1906, drew thousands to a former barn and tombstone shop. William Seymour, a travelling black preacher from Louisiana, led the devotees. Men and women, young and old, black and white, sang, shouted, spoke in unknown tongues, and believed that they were witnessing a new age of the spirit unlike anything since the holy ghost descended on the apostles in the second chapter of the New Testament book of Acts. The “color line,” adherents liked to proclaim, was washed away in the blood in these last days before Jesus’ second coming.

Interracial services and prominent woman preachers largely went the way of the horse and buggy. By the 1920s and 1930s most pentecostals had divided into all-white or all-black fellowships, while fewer and fewer women received ordination. Yet other distinctives lasted throughout the century. Energetic worship styles and revved-up music marked pentecostal churches from one generation to the next. From the earliest days believers liked to compare their spirit-filled churches with the lifeless drudgery of mainline congregations.

⁹ Mark Twain, “A Singular Episode: The Reception of Rev. Sam Jones in Heaven” in *The Bible According to Mark Twain: Writings on Heaven, Eden, and the Flood*, eds., Howard G. Baetzhold and Joseph B. McCullough (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 199, 200, 201. For a summary of the prohibitions and behavioral codes of the Church of God (Anderson, IN), see Valorous Bernard Clear, “The Church of God: A Study in Social Adaptation” (PhD. diss, University of Chicago, 1953), 220-228.

As one early convert put it: “Compared with [the pentecostal revival], any meeting of Baptists is as the silence of death.”¹⁰

Black storefront churches and rundown glory barns did not tend to attract members of the rotary club or the chamber of commerce. Some pentecostals clung to their outsider status with pride. The tony sorts accepted neither Jesus nor Paul in their day, they pointed out, so why should it be any different now? So-called respectable churches turned away from true Christianity and had a “Bible full of holes,” not a “Holy Bible.” But that animosity went both ways. “Holy roller,” “tonguer,” “religious fanatic,” and “bible thumper” were typical epithets hurled at the faithful. Even within evangelical circles pentecostalism was still coming under suspicion in the 1950s and 1960s. For instance, a Louisiana Methodist wrote to *Christianity Today* in 1963, expressing his discontent with what he thought were proud, boastful pentecostals. “I have found Pentecostals choosing to dissociate themselves from the major orthodox denominations,” he sneered, “because they claim to offer the Holy Ghost (pronounced HO-lyghost) as a bonus to people already ‘saved.’” Was this some kind of “Christian aristocracy” he asked rhetorically.¹¹

Adherents, in fact, did work diligently to distinguish themselves from other Christians. Folklore and English scholar Elaine J. Lawless notes that, “Pentecostals are

¹⁰ “Letter of a Baptist Preacher to His Wife Describing a Pentecostal Meeting at Durant, Fla.,” *The Evening Light and Church of God Evangel*, July 1, 1910, 2. On pentecostalism, see Roger G. Robins, *A. J. Tomlinson: Plainfolk Modernist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); Matthew Avery Sutton, *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); Anthea D. Butler, *Women in the Church of God in Christ: Making a Sanctified World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); and Randall J. Stephens, *The Fire Spreads: Holiness and Pentecostalism in the American South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

¹¹ Wallace P. Blackwood, “Pentecost,” *Christianity Today*, February 15, 1963, 25.

creating distinctive models for members to follow that will differentiate them from others, they are aware that many outsiders consider their behavior extreme. . . . By creating standards that seem extreme to the outsider,” Lawless writes, “Pentecostals create boundaries between themselves and others. They recognize that in so doing they often create negative images that are difficult to combat. The balance between ‘different’ and ‘freakish’ is not an easy one to maintain.”¹²

In many ways, however, as pentecostal and holiness churches grew, losing some of their so-called “freakishness,” they moved haltingly from the fringe to the American religious mainstream. In June 1958 *Life* magazine ran a cover story on what its editors called a “third force in Christendom.” That third force—made up of pentecostals, adventists, holiness groups, and a host of what were derogatorily called “fringe sects”—seemed likely to outpace Catholicism and protestantism. One observer in the *Life* feature cautioned that not all third force Christians were rowdy, barnstorming, chandelier swingers. Still, the reporter ventured, “Swingy hymns and passionate preaching stir up the congregation’s emotions, and worshipers respond with hand clapping, arm-waving, loud singing, dancing in the aisles, shouted ‘amens.’”¹³ This was not like the sedate services of most mainline churches. Indeed, historians like Grant Wacker, Roger Robbins, Kate Bowler, and Matthew Sutton have explored the innovative, dynamic aspects of the self-proclaimed “old-time faith.”¹⁴ Similarly

¹² Elaine J. Lawless, *God’s Peculiar People: Women’s Voices and Folk Tradition in a Pentecostal Church* (1988; Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2005), 38.

¹³ “Gospel-singing, Doomsday-preaching Sects Emerge as a Mighty Movement in World Religion,” *Life*, June 9, 1958, 122.

¹⁴ Roger G. Robbins, *A. J. Tomlinson: Plainfolk Modernist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 5; David Martin, “Pentecostalism: An Alternative Form of Modernity and Modernization?” in *Global Pentecostalism in the 21st Century*, ed., Peter L. Berger (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013); Matthew Avery Sutton, *Aimee Semple*

Shayne Lee and Phillip Luke Sinitiere observe that like pentecostals, evangelical “innovators offer simple, more effective communication that is in stark contrast to the doctrinal diatribes lettered clergy offer every Sunday. Innovators will sacrifice theoretical precision for dynamic leadership . . .”¹⁵ Adherents were pragmatists. Church growth, high-energy worship, and spirit-filled living mattered most to believers.

Relatively new to the American religious scene, pentecostalism mostly drew the disapproval of outside critics, be those journalists or academics. In the view of typical skeptics, the movement catered to overly emotional, child-minded types. Charismatic, sordid ministers, in the Elmer Gantry mode, preyed on weak-willed and uneducated poor people.¹⁶ By these lights, the holy ghost religion of blacks and whites was at best a harmless kind of escapism. Yet, some observers found more positive features of the sanctified faith. In the 1960s an Ohio anthropologist interviewed members of black urban storefront churches. Congregants made up a “warm, understanding, enthusiastic band of baptized believers.” Their lively worship services, thought this observer, allowed for a freedom of expressions missing in other areas of life. One subject he interviewed responded directly to doubters: “A

McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

¹⁵ Shayne Lee and Phillip Luke Sinitiere, *Holy Mavericks: Evangelical Innovators and the Spiritual Marketplace* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 22

¹⁶ H. L. Mencken, “Yearning Mountaineers’ Souls Need Reconversion Nightly, Mencken Finds,” *Baltimore Evening Sun*, July 13, 1925, 1-2; William A. Clark, “Sanctification in Negro Religion,” *Social Forces* 15 (May 1937): 546, 549; Will Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (1955; reprint, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 123; Norman G. Eddy, “Store-Front Religion,” *Religion in Life* 28:1 (1958-59): 68-85; J. Paul Williams, *What Americans Believe and How They Worship* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 434-436. See also Deidre Helen Crumbley, *Saved and Sanctified: The Rise of a Storefront Church in Great Migration Philadelphia* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2012), 17-27.

lot of folks talk about getting too emotional,” he confided. “I wouldn’t give two cents for a religion that wouldn’t make me move. My God is a living God.” Energetic services, and spirited music, in this telling, proved the truth and godliness of the movement.¹⁷

Such hard-driving, powerful music and worship could be mesmerizing. Critically acclaimed African-American novelist James Baldwin well expressed the excitement, emotion, and ecstasy of pentecostal services in his semi-autobiographical *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1952). Setting the story in 1930s Harlem, Baldwin narrated the life of young protagonist John. The congregants of his family’s pentecostal church:

sang with all the strength that was in them, and clapped their hands for joy. There had never been a time when John had not sat watching the saints rejoice with terror in his heart, and wonder. Their singing caused him to believe in the presence of the Lord; indeed, it was no longer a question of belief, because they made that presence real. . . . While John watched, the Power struck someone, a man or woman; they cried out, a long, wordless crying, and, arms outstretched like wings, they began the shout.¹⁸

The lesser-known white novelist Jack Conroy presented similar scenes of religious pandemonium in his semiautobiographical Depression-era, proletarian novel, *A World to Win* (1935). The humorist Conroy’s story of two vagabond, bohemian brothers in Missouri included a subplot on a “Holy Roller Church” with its “sagging frame building.” Drawing on his early familiarity with holiness-pentecostal faith and preaching in Missouri, Conroy describes the church’s interior, with its pot-bellied stove and walls bedecked with colorful charts plotting out the end of the world. The saints might be hit with the power of the Holy Ghost and fall to the floor in a heap. The “holy rollers” pastor Epperson, wrote Conroy, was a divine healer and “could be heard bellowing pleas or threats at the unsaved, or, ‘the gift of

¹⁷ Ira E. Harrison, “The Storefront Church as a Revitalization Movement,” *Review of Religious Research* 7:3 (1966): 161.

¹⁸ James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1952; New York: Random House, 2000), 7-8.

tongues,' having fallen upon him, mouthing unintelligible gibberish." Congregants "expressed their exuberance by dancing violently for hours at a time." Epperson might fall to the floor in a trance, narrated Conroy: "He muttered to himself: 'Yes Lord! I understand, Jesus! It shall be done! Praise Thy holy name! Whooooooeee! *ashanagi makeesha mahio heeshana hyshen a lia genoa! Whooooooeee!*'" In Conroy's fictional Missouri town locals thought the saints' behavior as scandalous as it was amusing.¹⁹

In between the publication of these two provocative novels that featured the power and passions of pentecostal religion, a concise sociological study of black pentecostal churches in Chicago took stock of transplanted southern churches. The researchers accounted for various worship styles and rituals across the spectrum of black religious experience. These observers, who fanned out across the city, classed their forty subject churches into four broad categories: "(1) the crowd that dances, (2) the group which indulges in demonstrative assent, (3) the congregation which prefers sermon-centered services, and (4) the church with formal liturgy." According to the researchers those in the first group—which consisted of pentecostal and spiritualist churches—were put off by the formality of traditional black churches. These recent arrivals from the rural South turned to more expressive and ecstatic houses of worship for spiritual sustenance.²⁰

The study certainly reveals the class and cultural biases of social scientists in this era. In this telling pentecostals are primitive, isolated, ignorant, and crude. Nonetheless, the project also recorded the activities in these "store-front" tabernacles with a careful eye and a

¹⁹ Jack Conroy, *A World to Win* (1935; reprint, Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000) quotes on 36, 37, and 38. For additional context, see also Douglas Wixson's "Introduction" to *A World to Win*, xxiii.

²⁰ Vettel Elbert Daniel, "Ritual and Stratification in Chicago Negro Churches," *American Sociological Review* 7:3 (June 1942): 354-355.

documentarian's attention to detail. The laborers and domestic servants that made up such churches, worshipped with a kind of vigor and abandon unimaginable in more staid, established congregations. The principle investigator in the study, Vattel Elbert Daniel of Wiley College in Texas, summarized the worship, sermon topics, and music of nine "Ecstatic Cults." Their instruments included piano, "percussion, such as drums, tamborines [sic], triangles and sometimes a wind instrument, usually a trumpet." The conduct of the services was "highly theatrical and it is recognized by rapid and rhythmic movement; at times, in some of the cults, the ecstasy becomes so great that pandemonium reigns." Participants testified to healings, praised their risen Lord, or warned of the imminent second coming of Jesus. Taking in what seemed like chaos, Daniel also scrutinized the bodily exercises of laypeople and their preachers:

In most cases, the frenzy includes yelling, tapping, stamping, shouting, and, in some instances, running and jumping, including the type which resembles the movements of a jumping jack. Loud praying while standing with hands uplifted, and speaking in tongues while in a similar position constitute the climax of the ecstatic behavior, although this was not so prevalent as were the rhythmic hand-clapping and foot-patting.²¹

For Daniel this all contrasted quite astonishingly with the services in African-American churches that he described as upper middle class. Scenes in fourteen so-called "deliberative churches"—Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Congregational—seemed positively quietist by comparison. Daniel summed up the order of the service: "Formality without a great amount of liturgy; activity of the pastor shared by ministerial and lay assistants." Daniel wanted to know something more about what marked off the newly arrived

²¹ Daniel, "Ritual and Stratification in Chicago Negro Churches," 360, quotes on 358 and 359.

pentecostals from their religious competitors in the Windy City. Believers in these churches, commonly lumped together as “holy rollers,” set themselves apart by:

speaking in tongues, in which the believers repeat rapidly and loudly unintelligible symbols; . . . healing ritual, in which the sick are anointed with oil and surrounded by a praying, singing, and dancing group; saint-making ritual, in which believers are supposed to receive the Holy Ghost, after white-robed saints kneel with them and pray loudly, accompanied by rapidly repeated rhythmical assent, while the pianist plays a revival hymn²²

In the same year that the Chicago study was published, to the west in California, a PhD student in sociology at the University of Southern California made notes while attending the pentecostal churches of agricultural workers. Some services looked almost formal, he wrote, while others seemed like a “wild frenzy from beginning to end.” The enthusiasts he observed won few friends among labor organizers when they refused to join unions. Their revved up music and loud singing also provoked the scorn of outsiders. In the early 1940s the researcher observed that the chief concern of the service seemed to be to arouse congregants:

This is done through prayer, testimony, songs, sermon, shouting, clapping the hands, and vigorous physical activity on the part of the leader or leaders. Occasionally, banjos or other instruments are used. The songs are especially emotional in nature. Their appeal is never made to the intellect. It is rhythmic, loud, and joyful. It is catchy, and never difficult. It is decided in its emotional coloring and so serves to arouse the particular emotions of awe, hope, repentance, and the like. Choruses are often repeated eight or ten times while bodies sway back and forth, and feet beat out the music upon the floor. Lusty, “Amen’s,” and vigorous “Hallelujah’s” resound all over the room.²³

²² Daniel, “Ritual and Stratification in Chicago Negro Churches,” 355, 358.

²³ James Bright Wilson, “Religious Leaders, Institutions and Organizations among Certain Agricultural Workers in the Central Valley of California,” (PhD. Diss, University of Southern California, 1944), quote on 273. For a 1942 “Description of a Service” in the Pentecostal Holiness Church, see 273-288.

Each of these accounts of high-energy worship and holiness belief was similar to what regionalist painter Thomas Hart Benton saw in white churches on a trip that he made through the mountain South in the early 1930s. With a far more sarcastic, even Menckenesque tone, Benton spoke of believers' "Dionysiac madness," which he nonetheless found deeply moving. His account of mountain holiness emphasized the exotic, grotesque, and thinly veiled eroticism of devotees, a common theme in journalistic and popular portrayals. At roughly the same time the lawyer and poet William Alexander Percy pilloried the riotous religion of Mississippi's poor whites, who "attend revivals and fight and fornicate in the bushes afterwards."²⁴ In Benton's account, stalwarts were primitives and zealous hardliners. As he made his way through West Virginia, he encountered a banjo-picking preacher, recently hounded out of Baptist country by a shower of stones. The headstrong itinerant had written "Holiness" on his instrument. Benton observed such figures playing in up-tempo services, carried by rhythmic music and shouts of "Amen. Blessed be His name." He made numerous sketches, one of which became the study for his masterful painting, *Lord, Heal the Child* (1934), depicting a female preacher ministering over a young disabled girl in a ramshackle church.²⁵ Pentecostal and holiness people embraced the new, played stringed

²⁴ William Alexander Percy, *Lanterns on the Levee: Recollections of a Planter's Son* (1941; reprint, Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 149.

²⁵ Leo G. Mazow, *Thomas Hart Benton and the American Sound* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), 76-79. Thomas Hart Benton, *An Artist in America* (1937; reprint, Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1968), 97-98, 100-101; Annett Claudia Richter, "Fiddles, Harmonicas, and Banjos: Thomas Hart Benton and His Role in Constructing Popular Notions of American Folk Music and Musicians" (PhD diss., University of Minnesota, 2008), 188-189.

instruments and danced about. The music, to the famous painter's ears, sounded like dancehall music.²⁶

Much of the initial energy of pentecostalism burst forth in the hills and hollers of the South that Benton travelled. It also took root in growing cities and towns along the Mississippi River and followed migrants on the great migration. Even the lively church of James Baldwin's fictional Harlem, the Temple of the Fire Baptized, was populated by recent arrivals from Dixie. Similarly, first generation rock music was largely a southern phenomenon. Scholars Bill C. Malone and David Stricklin observe the strong links between the South and early rock and roll. Even as Elvis became an international star, they write, "neither he nor the other young southern singers who followed in his wake could ever escape, even had they desired, the marks of their southern bred culture." Furthermore, they note, "Singers such as Carl Perkins, Roy Orbison, Jerry Lee Lewis, Charlie Rich, and Conway Twitty carried the dialects and inflections of the Deep South in their speech and singing styles."²⁷ The same could be said of black singers. Many of both races also first sang in public in pentecostal or evangelical churches. Such links are not altogether coincidental. Still, hot music in the service of the Lord, believers assured themselves, was very unlike the riotous new rhythm and blues or rock and roll music. But they were more similar than the devout were willing to concede.

The leap from unbridled sanctified music to rock and roll was not a great one. Critic Nick Tosches even ventures, with a dash of hyperbole, that "if you took the words away, there were more than a few Pentecostal hymns that would not sound foreign coming from the

²⁶ Thomas Hart Benton, *An Artist in America*, 106. 110-111.

²⁷ Bill C. Malone and David Stricklin, *Southern Music/American Music* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2003), 102, quote on 104.

nickel machine in the wildest juke joint.”²⁸ Unlike their cultured despisers, pentecostals were not burdened with the trappings of tradition, the weight of convention. That may explain why something as new and scandalous as snake handling would originate in white pentecostal churches in the upcountry South. The saints had long used the latest technologies to distribute tracts and newspapers. They sang new, fast-paced hymns, and worshiped in ways that made other protestants shudder with disgust. They would also go on to pioneer radio and television ministries.²⁹

Free of a variety of constraints, pentecostals held uninhabited, unconventional revivals. Black and white pentecostal music tore down the walls of genres as well. Arizona Dranes, Eddie Head, and other black sanctified performers in the early 20th century borrowed instruments and melodies from the secular scene. Arkansas native Sister Rosetta Tharpe, called the “Godmother of Rock,” achieved critical acclaim in the late 1930s for her skillful guitar accompanied gospel. All over the South foot-stomping, boogie-woogie pianists, jazz trumpeters, and jug bands led worship in the African-American Church of God in Christ. That denomination spread into the urban north with black migration. Beginning in the 1940s and 1950s black pentecostal quartets began to exert a greater influence on mainstream black gospel music. This new style was louder, more rhythmic, and affective than what had dominated the scene before.³⁰ The jazzy shout music that shook church windows paralleled the development of rhythm and blues.

²⁸ Nick Tosches, *Hellfire: The Jerry Lee Lewis Story* (New York: Dell, 1982), 57.

²⁹ Shayne Lee, *T. D. Jakes: America's New Preacher* (New York: New York University Press), 1-3, 158-177.

³⁰ Jon Hartley Fox, *King of the Queen City: The Story of King Records* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 119-120.

Similar musical innovations took place in white pentecostal churches. Washboard players, flatpicking guitarist, and fiddlers enlivened white congregations. The impact of these musical trailblazers reached well beyond the walls of tumbledown churches. Many of the first-generation rockers, who grew up in pentecostal denominations, credited sanctified music with giving them new, exciting ideas. They said that the unrestrained style of tongues churches made an indelible impression.³¹

One of those was Johnny Cash, from Dyess, Arkansas, who attended a branch of the Church of God (Cleveland), a pentecostal denomination headquartered in the upcountry of Tennessee. In Dyess Cash came to Jesus when he was 12 during the congregation's singing of the altar call classic "Just as I Am."³² Local initiates held animated meetings in an old schoolhouse. Years later, the "Man in Black" remembered scenes of religious ecstasy. "[W]rithing on the floor, the moaning, the trembling, and the jerks" along with hellfire sermons and frenzied religious excitement struck him to the core. "My knuckles would be white as I held onto the seat in front of me," he recalled. Worshipers hollered in unknown tongues. Cash thought that the uninhibited music, the improvisation, and variety of instruments played were liberating, powerful. The future country star Tammy Wynette, from nearby Mississippi, also frequented a Church of God congregation as a youngster. She also went to a Baptist church, which she found to be stuffy by comparison. With the pentecostals

³¹ Jerma Jackson, "Sister Rosetta Tharpe and the Evolution of Gospel Music," in *Religion in the American South: Protestants and Others in History and Culture*, eds., Beth Barton Schweiger and Donald G. Mathews (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 219-222, 230-232. Paul Oliver, *Songsters and Saints: Vocal Traditions on Race Records* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 170-171, 188-189, 197-198. Teresa L. Reed, *The Holy Profane*, 35-38.

³² Don Cusic, "Cash, Johnny," in *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Christian Music: Pop, Rock, and Worship*, ed., Don Cusic (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC CLIO, 2010), 42.

Wynette pounded out hymns and spirituals on the piano. Unlike the starchy Baptist minister, Wynette recalled, the Church of God preacher “would let you bring in guitars and play rockin’ gospel more like black gospel music.”³³

Southern-born rockers Little Richard and B.B. King, who attended black pentecostal churches, recalled similar scenes.³⁴ Little Richard Penniman, the son of a part-time moonshiner, cultivated a loud, vibrant stage persona when he first toured through the South in the early 1950s. “Of all the churches,” in Macon, Georgia, he said, “I used to like going to the Pentecostal Church because of the music.” And why not, his favorite musician was the pentecostal guitarist Sister Rosetta Tharpe. So, the young Penniman could not believe his luck when he had the chance to sing with the famous performer at the Macon City Auditorium on October 27, 1947. It marked his first secular public performance. Tharpe, with her commanding stage presence and unique picking style, played a large solid-body Gibson electric guitar. Little Richard and the fans at the show were spellbound. “I was just a kid,” he recalled over sixty years later. “I’d get lost in the music. I was singing on my own when Sister Rosetta heard me. She asked me to come up on stage with her to sing ‘Five Loaves and Two Fishes.’ When I heard the audience go wild when we were finished, I knew what I wanted to do.”³⁵ But he also felt called to the ministry. From the time he was a boy, he remembered, “I wanted to be a preacher. I wanted to be like Brother Joe May, the singing

³³ Stephen R. Tucker, “Pentecostalism and Popular Culture in the South,” 68-78. Johnny Cash, *Man in Black* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 25. Tammy Wynette with Joan Dew, *Stand by Your Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 23-24.

³⁴ B.B. King with David Ritz, *B.B. King: The Autobiography* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1997), 16-18.

³⁵ Marc Myers, “A Cultural Conversation with Little Richard: Richard, the First,” *Wall Street Journal*, August 10, 2010, D5; Preston Lauterbach, *The Chitlin' Circuit: And the Road to Rock 'n' Roll* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011), 152.

evangelist, who they called” the Thunderbolt of the Midwest. He styled his hair into a curly pile, much like singing evangelists did. Richard, a Seventh-day Adventist, heard impressive sermons at one pentecostal church, at which he and his friends would do the holy dance and “imitate them talking in tongues, though we didn’t know what we were saying.”³⁶

Jerry Lee Lewis, roughly the same age as Little Richard, was born into a dirt-poor family in Ferriday, Louisiana. He attended a Church of God congregation as well as an Assemblies of God church with his family. From his earliest years he absorbed the traditional hymns and spirituals along with the culture of pentecostalism. Jerry Lee’s aunt, Ada, underwent what pentecostals call a baptism of the spirit at a camp meeting in Snake Ridge, Louisiana. Her grandson—and Jerry Lee’s cousin—Jimmy Lee Swaggart recalled her experience, common in pentecostal settings. To anyone who would listen she said: “You’ve got to get it. You’ve got to have it. You really don’t know the Lord like you should until you receive it.” She exclaimed: “The presence of God became so real.” In an instant, “it seemed as if I had been struck by a bolt of lightning. Lying flat on my back, I raised my hands to praise the Lord. No English came out. Only unknown tongues.”³⁷ The family followed her example and became committed believers. At the Assemblies of God church in Ferriday Jerry Lee sang alongside Jimmy Lee, who would go on to fame as a TV preacher. With a local evangelist Jerry Lee toured briefly around the South playing the piano and speaking. He

³⁶ Charles Sawyer, *The Arrival of B. B. King* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1980), 39-40. Myra Lewis with Murray Silver, *Great Balls of Fire: The Uncensored Story of Jerry Lee Lewis* (New York: William Murrow, 1982), 34-35, 308-311. Little Richard quoted in Charles White, *The Life and Times of Little Richard: The Quasar of Rock* (New York: De Capo Press, 1994), quote: 16; 17. Marvin Gaye and Dolly Parton also attended pentecostal churches in their youth.

³⁷ Jimmy Swaggart with Robert Paul Lamb, *To Cross a River* (Plainfield, NJ: Logos International, 1977), 26, 27; quote on 28.

abandoned that for a shot at fame with a Sun Records recording session in November 1956. Not long after that he became an international celebrity. Jerry Lee and Jimmy Lee parted company. Jerry Lee went on to rock and roll stardom. Jimmy Lee would eventually become one of the most famous preachers in the country. Said Swaggart years later: “Why do I need forty suits, I’m clothed in a robe of righteousness! Why do I need Cadillacs and Lincolns when I can ride with the King of Kings? Jerry Lee can go to Sun Records in Memphis, I’m on my way to heaven with a God who supplies all my need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus.”³⁸

Undoubtedly, the most famous performer to emerge from a tongues-speaking church was Elvis Presley, Sun Records’ most celebrated star. Born into poverty in Tupelo, Mississippi, Elvis and his parents moved to Memphis in 1948. His mother, a committed believer, searched for a local church. The growing Memphis First Assembly of God initially met in a tent. With membership swelling the congregation moved to a storefront. Then it finally settled in its own building, a sign of the firm establishment of pentecostalism in the South. The church sponsored a radio ministry and then a TV program in the 1950s. Not long after the Presleys arrived in town, a First Assembly bus drove through the family’s ragged neighborhood. They boarded it, and became regulars of pastor James Hamill’s congregation. The teenage Elvis was shy, awkward, and quiet. The country boy’s trousers were hitched too high and his hair was long, remembered Hamill, but he was a courteous, respectful teen. Elvis didn’t drink or smoke, which Hamill found commendable. Elvis attended Sunday

³⁸ Jimmy Swaggart with Robert Paul Lamb, *To Cross a River*, 100. See also Jerry Lee Lewis Subject Folder, Center for Popular Music, Middle Tennessee State University. Ann Rowe Seaman, *Swaggart: The Unauthorized Biography of an American Evangelist* (New York: Continuum, 1999).

school. He also snuck out of his church from time to time to attend black sanctified churches in the area.³⁹

Elvis would become an enormous fan of black gospel music as well as rhythm and blues. The star was quite frank about his musical tastes and favorite records. There were certainly plenty of doubters, black and white, who accused Elvis of musical theft across the color line. White performers made millions playing and recording rhythm and blues tracks while their black counterparts never achieved the same level of fame and financial security. How could a performer like Elvis, asked numerous critics, gain fame and fortune while colored artists were either ignored or pushed aside?⁴⁰ Black gospel singer Mahalia Jackson was even more specific, calling out Elvis for his “deliberate theft from religious music” and misusing “the best qualities in music which had been sacred to Negro people for years.”⁴¹ Yet, rock music, as played by Elvis and contemporaries, drew on a variety of styles and genres, including honky tonk country, rhythm and blues, swing, as well as white and black gospel in the sanctified tradition.

³⁹ Peter Guralnick, *Last Train to Memphis: The Rise of Elvis Presley* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1994), 426. Rev. James E. Hamill, Memphis, TN, to Rev. Ralph M. Riggs, Springfield, MO, August 1, 1956, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, MO.

⁴⁰ See, for instance, Michael T. Bertrand, “Elvis Presley and the Politics of Popular Memory,” *Southern Cultures* 13:3 (2007): 62-86; Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (London: UCL Press, 1998), 6, 120. Louie Robinson, “The Blackening of White America,” *Ebony* (May 1980): 158-162; “B.B. King Hears How Presley Copied Style,” *Chicago Defender*, February 2, 1957, 14; Amiri Baraka, *Digging: The Afro-American Soul of American Classical Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 97, 114, 135; Langston Hughes, “Highway Robbery across the Color Line in Rhythm and Blues,” *Chicago Defender*, July 2, 1955, 9; and Ralph Matthews, “Thinking Out Loud,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, March 16, 1957, 16.

⁴¹ Mahalia Jackson quoted in Michael T. Bertrand, *Race, Rock, and Elvis* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 220.

Perhaps more than anything else, Elvis's first, and most enduring influence was white southern gospel music. At Memphis First Assembly, the young impressionable teen witnessed the gospel stylings of the Blackwood Brothers and the Stamps Quartet. Those two groups pioneered white southern gospel. Members from each attended First Assembly. Speaking about the Stamps Quartet in 1972, Elvis, his drug-addled eyes obscured by massive sunglasses, said, "we grew up with it. From the time I was . . . like two years old . . . because my folks took me there. When I got old enough, I started to sing in church." Asked if that's how he got into singing, Elvis remarked that it was one of the ways. "The gospel is . . . what we grew up with, more than anything else."⁴²

Elvis was exposed to the best in pentecostal music. Thus, in 1956, after he became world famous, Presley spoke to an associated press reporter about the impact of church music:

We used to go to these religious singins all the time. There were these singers, perfectly fine singers, but nobody responded to 'em. Then there were these other singers—the leader wuz a preacher—and they cut up all over the place, jumpin' on the piano, movin' every which way. The audience liked 'em. I guess I learned from them singers.⁴³

⁴² Pierre Adidge and Robert Abel interview with Elvis, March 31, 1972, in *Elvis—Word for Word: What He Said, Exactly As He Said It* (New York: Harmony Books, 2000), 243. See also Rose Clayton and Dick Heard, *Elvis up Close: In the Words of Those Who Knew Him Best* (Atlanta: Turner Publishing, 1994), 13-17; interview with Elvis about religion in Jack Carrell, "I Like Elvis Presley," *Ottawa Citizen*, September 8, 1956, 11; and Elvis's 1966 interview with May Mann, quoted in Peter Guralnick, *Careless Love: The Unmaking of Elvis Presley* (Boston: Back Bay Books, 2000), 223.

⁴³ Vince Staten, *The Real Elvis: Good Old Boy* (Dayton, OH: Media Ventures, 1978), 47-48. Van K. Brock, "Assemblies of God: Elvis and Pentecostalism," *Bulletin of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture and Religion* 3 (June 1979): 9-15. On Elvis's relationship with the Blackwood Brothers, see James R. Goff, Jr., *Close Harmony: A History of Southern Gospel* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 237-238. Saul Pett, "Why Do the Girls Love Elvis?" *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 22 July 1956, L-7. "Elvis Says Jumping 'Arown' Comes Natural When He Sings"; Saul Pett, "'It's Just the Way Ah Feel,' Says Young Elvis"; Louella O. Parsons, "What Makes Elvis Rock?"; Saul Pett, "I Don't Feel Sexy

Energetic pentecostalism gave the young Elvis new ideas. He marveled at the fiery rhetoric and acrobatics of traveling preachers at Memphis's First Assembly of God. Elvis's style—his long hair combed back into a pompadour, loud outfits, and showmanship—owed much to pentecostal-flavored gospel groups. J.D. Sumner, of the Stamps Quartet who sang backup for Elvis, recalled that in the early 1950s southern gospel singers wore flashy clothes and, before it came into vogue, sported long hair, combed back in a swoop. That this influenced an impressionable young Elvis is not at all surprising. His childhood dream had been to be part of a tight, harmonizing gospel quartet.⁴⁴ According to music historian Don Cusic: "Elvis admitted to copying the singing style of Jake Hess," leader of the Statesmen Quartet from 1948-1963. "The source for so much of Elvis Presley's music and personal style," notes Cusic, "came from the southern gospel world. The attitudes, tastes, and style in his dress and performances were then passed on to a whole generation of teenagers who had never heard of southern gospel or, if they had, probably despised it."⁴⁵ A family friend from Memphis echoed that view, remarking: "undoubtedly Elvis' free form and

When I Sing, Pleads Diamond Loaded Elvis" (newspapers clippings, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, MO). Peter Guralnick, *Last Train to Memphis*, 17, 67, 75. See the *Elvis Answers Back* magazine interview with Elvis on "My True Religion." Elvis was clearly bothered by claims that he had given up on religion since he became famous. Elvis Presley, "My True Religion," August 28, 1956, in Jerry Osborne, ed., *Elvis*, 70.

⁴⁴ J.D. Sumner quoted in Don Cusic, "Singing with the King: The Groups That Performed With Elvis," *Rejoice! The Gospel Music Magazine* (Summer 1988): 13. Peter Guralnick, *Careless Love*, 233. See also J.D. Sumner with Bob Terrell, *Elvis: His Love for Gospel Music and J.D. Sumner* (Nashville: W.C.I. Publishing, 1991), 5-19.

⁴⁵ Don Cusic, "Southern Gospel and Contemporary Christian Music," in *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Christian Music*, 410.

almost involuntary style of dancing the world would discover was strongly shaped by his experiences at church.”⁴⁶

Elvis spoke little about the possible pentecostal sources of his outrageous outfits, vocal style, or stage moves. In 1956 when asked by a *TV Guide* reporter about the influence of his “holy roller” faith, Elvis snapped back, saying he would never use a derogatory term like that. “I belong to an Assembly of God church, which is a holiness church,” the young star told Paul Wilder of *TV Guide*. In the long interview held on August 6, 1956, at the Polk Theatre, Lakeland, Florida, Elvis continued: “I was raised up in a little Assembly of God church. And some, uh, character called them ‘holy rollers.’ Uh, and that’s where that got started. I always attended a church where people sang. Stood up and sang in the choir and worshipped god, you know. I have never used the expression ‘holy roller.’” Clearly on the defensive, he then denied that his music had much connection to his religious roots.⁴⁷

South Carolina music legend James Brown was a bit more direct about the matter. In his autobiography the “Godfather of Soul” reflected on how important the bravura of one pentecostal preacher was for him. As a young man—living with his aunt who operated a brothel in Augusta, Georgia—Brown frequented the United House of Prayer for all People. Bishop Daddy Grace, an immigrant from Cape Verde and a controversial black pentecostal prophet, founded the denomination in 1919. Grace, recalled Brown, would “get to preaching

⁴⁶ Jennifer Harrison, *Elvis as We Knew Him: Our Shared Life in a Small Town in South Memphis* (Lincoln, NE: iUniverse, 2003), 16-17. See also Elvis Presley Subject Folder, Center for Popular Music, Middle Tennessee State University; Charles Wolfe, “Elvis Presley and the Gospel Tradition,” in *The Elvis Reader: Texts and Sources on the King of Rock ‘n’ Roll*, ed., Kevin Quan (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992), 13-27; and Joe Moscheo, *The Gospel Side of Elvis* (New York: Center Street, 2007), 27-36.

⁴⁷ Paul Wilder interview with Elvis Presley, August 6, 1956, Polk Theatre, Lakeland, Florida, in Jerry Osborne, ed., *Elvis*, 52-53.

and the people would get in a ring and they'd go round and round and go right behind one another, just shouting. Sometimes they'd fall out right there in the sawdust, shaking and jerking and having convulsions." The posts in the church were padded so that enthusiasts, taken up in the spirit, wouldn't hurt themselves.⁴⁸

In typical fashion a reporter for the *Augusta Chronicle* offered up a colorful, exotic portrait of a 1938 meeting of the House of Prayer Brown attended. The church "rocked and swayed to the rhythm, shouts and dances of hundreds of worshipers yesterday," the journalist wrote. The night meeting began an hour before Grace, who intermittently visited the Augusta outpost, made his way to the front. "The tambourine band, the Queen's band, the string band, the Bishop Grace staff band, the rhythm band and assorted chanting, singing and clapping," all put the congregation in a heightened state. The reporter then noted that one older woman convulsed and dropped to the sawdust floor, where she remained for the rest of the service. Others twitched, shouted, and danced with joy. Once Daddy Grace joined the assembly, shouts of "yeah man" and "Hail Daddy" burst from the audience.⁴⁹ In 1940 Columbia, South Carolina, officials closed a House of Prayer church for creating a "disturbance" in the neighborhood. Grace himself was anything but sedate. His flowing robes, shoulder-length hair, and thin mustache captured the attention of his rapt followers. Often arrayed in luxurious suits with gold piping, donning a cape, or sporting hand-painted ties, Grace won much notoriety and even more newspaper coverage for his religious practices and

⁴⁸ James Brown with Bruce Tucker, *James Brown: The Godfather of Soul* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1986), 18, 19.

⁴⁹ "Bishop Grace Is Welcomed by Fervid Followers Here," *Augusta Chronicle*, September 21, 1938, 5.

extravagant claims. Equal parts showman and patriarch, he conducted mass baptisms of hundreds of parishioners at outdoor services by using a fire hose.⁵⁰

When Grace died in 1960, *Ebony* magazine eulogized him as a holy father to the 375,000 members of his United House of Prayer for All People. Though, noted the obituary, to others he remained a “Cadillac-riding materialist” or “a brown-skinned P. T. Barnum who cracked the whip in a circus of gaudy costumes, wildly gyrating acrobats and brass bands that played as if God were a cosmic hipster.”⁵¹ Even the young James Brown doubted Grace’s legitimacy. But the powerful preacher still seemed “like a god on earth” to him. The same held true for others. Rhythm and blues and soul legend Solomon Burke, Grace’s godson, served for some time as a minister in the United House of Prayer. The impressionable young Brown took in the blasting trombones, the passionate worship, and admired the show that the caped minister put on for churchgoers. “Those folks were sanctified,” he said looking back years later, “they had the beat. . . . Sanctified people got more fire.”⁵²

Though Brown and Presley had a high opinion of pentecostals—their music, their “fire”—such sentiments were not mutual. From the early days of his stardom, Elvis’s

⁵⁰ “‘Daddy’ Grace Seeks Permit for Church,” *Augusta Chronicle*, July 3, 1941, 2. Marie W. Dallam, *Daddy Grace: A Celebrity Preacher and His House of Prayer* (New York: New York University Press, 2007). Dudley K. Brewer, “Bishop Grace Is Austere Ruler and ‘Daddy’ to All House of Prayer Members,” *Augusta Chronicle*, November 15, 1935, 6. “Baptizes 200 with Hose and Asks for Cash,” *Springfield Republican*, August 20, 1945. “Daddy Grace: Grandiloquent Negro Preacher Has a Half-Million Faithful Followers,” *Life*, October 1, 1945, 51.

⁵¹ Alex Poinsett, “Farewell to Daddy: Both Praised and Condemned, Prelate Is as Much an Enigma in Death as He Was in Life,” *Ebony* (April 1960): 25.

⁵² James Brown with Bruce Tucker, *James Brown*, 18, 19. George Lipsitz, *Footsteps in the Dark: The Hidden Histories of Popular Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), xix-xx. See also Timothy White, “Searing Fires vs. Sounds of Faith,” *Billboard*, June 29, 1996, 5.

childhood pastor, James Hamill, knew that the singer could no longer attend church, pursued by fans as he was. But the trouble with Elvis, thought Hamill, went much deeper than his spotty church attendance. Writing to the Assemblies of God's general superintendent in 1956, Hamill confided that Elvis "seems to be caught in a 'web,' spun by Satan and those around him who have suddenly brought him to fame and fortune." The celebrity rock 'n' roller should be prayed for earnestly, he recommended.⁵³

For the devout there was much to pray about. From 1955 to 1958 headlines announced a new wave of juvenile delinquency and social degeneracy linked to rock 'n' roll. In 1955 *Life* magazine reported on a "frenzied teen-age music craze" that was kicking "up a big fuss." Soon the blue suede scare spread into the South. In Atlanta police halted dances at the City Auditorium.⁵⁴ Fearing that the music incited violence and promoted sexual promiscuity, the San Antonio, Texas, Parks Department banned rock 'n' roll records from jukeboxes located at city swimming pools, special sites of segregationists' anxieties.⁵⁵

What was going on here? Journalists and opinion makers rushed to explain the phenomenon. Newspaper editors trotted out experts to weigh in on the origins of the music and the dangers of the craze. In 1957 a psychiatrist and an educational psychologist

⁵³ James E. Hamill, Memphis, TN, to Ralph M. Riggs, Springfield, MO, August 1, 1956, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, MO.

⁵⁴ Linda Martin and Kerry Segrave, *Anti-Rock: The Opposition to Rock 'n' Roll* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1993), 27-29. Paul Henry Lang, "Music and Musicians: The Riot in Asbury Park," *New York Herald Tribune*, July 22, 1956, D5; James Nelson Goodsell, "Rock 'n' Roll Opposition Rises: Adults Criticized Grand Jury Probes Riot State Law Sought," *Christian Science Monitor*, May 8, 1958, 3; and "Little Richard Fined in Texas," *Dallas Morning News*, August 28, 1956, 5.

⁵⁵ Linda Martin and Kerry Segrave, *Anti-Rock: The Opposition to Rock 'n' Roll* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1993), 31, 32-35. For more on anti-rock campaigns, see Michael T. Bertrand, *Race, Rock, and Elvis* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 181-184; and Glenn C. Altschuler, *All Shook Up: How Rock 'n' Roll Changed America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 105-112.

compared the mayhem to religious fits in the Middle Ages. Others claimed it was nothing more than the latest youth fad.⁵⁶ Violent, loud music naturally generated violent behavior, additional authorities assured a worried public.⁵⁷ A churchgoing mother made these connections and worried about the influence Elvis might have over her daughters. After *Life* ran a photo essay on the star in late summer 1956, she wrote a letter to the magazine's editor. Elvis was a novelty, she admitted, and youngsters probably went in for him because he was a dazzling performer. But she hoped that all the "years the church and I have spent on training my teen-age daughters" wouldn't be "obliterated by watching a performance or two by Elvis."⁵⁸

Lurking behind many such criticisms was a deeper fear of the rock's sexually explicit nature and the feline masculinity that stars like Little Richard, Jerry Lee Lewis, or Presley exuded. For decades, critics had claimed that pentecostals had pushed the boundaries of decency, mixing sex and salvation. Now rock and roll came under much greater scrutiny. Even the term "rock 'n' roll," like "jazz" before it, was a euphemism for sex. Fans, many of them teenage girls, said critics, were exposed to a host of vile profanities. With these criticisms lingering in the air, Elvis tore into the song "Long Tall Sally," written by Little

⁵⁶ Milton Bracker, "Experts Propose Study of 'Craze,'" *New York Times*, February 23, 1957, 12. "Presley Termed Passing Fancy: Minister in Village Asserts Singer Gives Teen-Ager," *New York Times*, December 17, 1956, 28. See other critical accounts: "Rock 'n' roll Called a Disease," *Catholic Choirmaster* 42 (Summer 1956): 121; Martin "Butch" Hardman, "Rock 'n' Roll: Music or Madness?" *Youth for Christ Magazine* (October 1958): 10-12; Norman King, "Teen-Age Idol Worship," *Youth for Christ Magazine* (March 1959): 6-7; and "Rock 'n' roll," *Alabama Baptist*, November 1, 1956, 3.

⁵⁷ Linda Martin and Kerry Segrave, *Anti-Rock*, 50-53.

⁵⁸ Verna B. Gordon, letter to the editor, *Life*, September 17, 1956, 19. See other, similar criticisms here: "Stritch Urges Catholics: Ban Rock and Roll," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 1, 1957, 4; "Rock 'n' Roll Hurting Teens, CYO Head Tells Police League," *Boston Globe*, May 16, 1960, 4; and Phyllis Battelle, "Rock 'n' roll Beat Irks People the Nation Over," *Journal and Guide*, June 30, 1956, 15.

Richard, Robert “Bumps” Blackwell, and Enotris Johnson, while over 26,000 teens roared at a Dallas stadium in October 1956. A reporter in the crowd took in the sights and sounds. Elvis’s “gyrating pelvic motions,” he observed, “are best described as a cross between an Apache war dance and a burlesque queen’s old-fashioned bumps and grind.” Earlier in the same year a writer at *Time* thought much the same. Elvis’s “movements suggest, in a word, sex.” Likewise, “his hips swing sensuously from side to side and his entire body takes on a frantic quiver, as if he had swallowed a jackhammer.”⁵⁹ Hence, cultural studies scholar Erika Doss notes of the pop icon: “In an anxious Cold War culture that demanded the demarcation of gender difference—gray-flanneled businessmen versus the Marilyns and Moms of American womanhood—Elvis clearly violated mainstream sexual roles.”⁶⁰

Deep in America’s Bible belt, rock and roll lit a raging fire of controversy. The rebellious, loud anthems of black and white teenagers threatened the good order of the white Christian South, and stirred the leadership and laity in black churches as well. As rock music hit big in 1955 and 1956, southern ministers and laypeople lined up to condemn the new genre. If rock *did* owe something to pentecostalism, said detractors, it was only a perverted, blasphemous copy. Churchmen had long guarded their Zion from encroaching threats—whether those be in the form of religious rebels, political radicals, or deviants of any stripe. It wasn’t only white conservatives, though, that registered such dangers. The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, with a geographic concentration in the Carolinas and

⁵⁹ Tony Zoppi, “Presley Thrills Crowd of 26,500,” *Dallas Morning News*, October 12, 1956, 2. “Music: Teeners’ Hero,” *Time*, May 14, 1956, 55.

⁶⁰ Erika Lee Doss, *Elvis Culture: Fans, Faith, and Image* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1999), 129.

Alabama, took aim at Elvis Presley. Vulnerable youth were being led on a “march of destruction,” complained church officials.⁶¹

Unlike their black counterparts, numerous conservative white critics sensed a dangerous racial menace.⁶² A typical denunciation, which folded together racial and religious anxieties, appeared in the Southern Baptist Convention’s *Home Life* magazine in 1957. Rock ‘n’ roll was like the “savage music” that missionaries heard booming in the distant jungles of the southern hemisphere. Like that, rock ‘n’ roll was some kind of twisted longing for God, wrote Jessie Funston Clubb. If that wasn’t clear enough, Clubb insisted that, “On main street and in African jungles, the beat of this wild rhythm is the same.” This theme would fuel the White Citizen’s Council’s denunciation of rock music as well. But Clubb and other southern evangelicals gave the racial element a spiritual twist. Fans were under a sort of spell. What else could explain the chaotic ecstasy typically seen at rock concerts? Clubb, who witnessed a rock ‘n’ roll show firsthand, recalled teenage fans “writhing, groaning, stomping, shaking, and shivering in an intense combination of physical and emotional effort.”⁶³ The white pentecostal Assemblies of God magazine for youth, *C.A. Herald*, agreed. A writer in its pages compared rock music and dancing to the “wildest tribes of savages in South America”

⁶¹ “Zion Body Hits Elvis Presley,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, December 8, 1956, 7.

⁶² Linda Martin and Kerry Segrave, *Anti-Rock*, 48-50.

⁶³ Jessie Funston Clubb, “What about Rock ‘n’ Roll?” *Home Life* (April 1957): 42, 43. For more on the racist element, see Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding*, 100; William Ward Ayer, “Jungle Madness in American Music,” *Youth For Christ Magazine* (November 1956): 19-21; William Ward Ayer, “Are Demon Forces at Work in the World Today?” *Baptist Standard*, October 27, 1956, 5-7; and David Wilkerson, “Juvenile Jungle,” *C.A. Herald* (January 1961): 8-9.

and Africa. Missionaries, the author claimed, could not really tell the difference between the gyrations of primitives in tropical jungles and the herky-jerky dancing of American teens.⁶⁴

Granted, rock ‘n’ roll music and rhythm and blues *did* produce its fare share of what critics labeled “race mixing.” Fifty years after the rock revolution one journalists went so far as to say that rock amounted to “the most miscegenated popular music ever to have existed . . .”⁶⁵ The blue suede scare that followed rock ‘n’ roll’s rise to national and international prominence drew together the anxieties of the Cold War era. American youth were on the brink. Lascivious stars were corrupting a generation, so said critics. Some of rock’s early detractors even claimed that the genre was a communist plot, hatched by internal subversives to corrupt teenagers. Asa Earl Carter, the Birmingham klansman and violent, arch segregationist, sensed an NAACP-sponsored communist conspiracy. The vulgarity and obscenity of the genre was, said Carter, meant to bring whites down to the “level with the Nigra.” The notion that rock was a red menace did not gain as much traction as the general opinion that rock was degenerate. Nonetheless, rock ‘n’ roll had become so vilified by 1956 and 1957 that critics easily linked it to the *bêtes noires* of the age—juvenile delinquency, illicit sex, race-mixing, and, even, communism.⁶⁶

Theories of racial chaos or communist subversion were the product of fevered imaginations. But still there was some truth in describing rock ‘n’ roll as integrationist, even

⁶⁴ Jack Wyrzten, “Rock and Roll,” *C.A. Herald* (November 1957): 6-7.

⁶⁵ Sasha Frere-Jones, “A Paler Shade of White: How Indie Rock Lost Its Soul,” *New Yorker*, October 22, 2007, 176.

⁶⁶ John Earl Haynes, *Red Scare or Red Menace? American Communism and Anticommunism in the Cold War Era* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996), 184. Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding*, 106, 225. See Elvis’s answer to the charge of rock as communist subversion in Jerry Osborne, ed., *Elvis*, 101, 111. Carter quoted in Michael T. Bertrand, *Race, Rock, and Elvis*, 163.

if it was accidentally so. Numerous early pentecostal services were also interracial. African-American teens bought Elvis records in droves. White youngsters lined up for tickets to see Little Richard, Fats Domino, or Chuck Berry in concert.⁶⁷ A teenage reporter at the *New York Amsterdam News* found much to admire in this regard. The new music should be associated with integration, he insisted in 1958. “Caucasian groups,” he editorialized, “do not demand special billboards or dressing rooms. In the audience, fair-skinned boys do not complain about sitting next to girls with Negroid features.” Had teens found the answer to the race problem in pop music, he wondered aloud.⁶⁸ Civil rights activist and minister Andrew Young certainly thought so. Less than a decade after rock and roll first lit up the music charts, Young discussed the impact of rock with a group of civil rights volunteers. “I say all of the time,” remarked the executive director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, “that rock and roll did more for integration than the church and if I was going to choose who I was going to let into the Kingdom . . . I might have to choose Elvis.” Presley was a major bridge between the white and black worlds, thought Young.⁶⁹

Regardless, quite a few black church leaders thought that the music and the culture it spawned were seriously wanting. Rock ‘n’ roll was distasteful, vulgar, and not right for Christian audiences. Worse, this threat seemed to be coming from *within* the church as well. In Memphis W. Herbert Brewster, the music coordinator for the African-American National Baptist Convention, called for an end of rock and roll church music. Brewster had been a

⁶⁷ Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding*, 139-140.

⁶⁸ David Anderson, “For the Defense of Rock ‘n’ Roll,” *New York Amsterdam News*, April 19, 1958, 13.

⁶⁹ Andrew Young, “SCOPE Orientation, June 18, 1965. Discussion of Problems of Understanding,” 0099-6. KZSU Project South Interviews (SC0066). Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, CA. www.oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/tf7489n969/entire_text/.

strong influence on the young Elvis, who occasionally showed up to hear him preach. Now, the preacher warned against the corrupting influence of the kind of music Elvis played. The carnival atmosphere in some black churches, Brewster warned in early 1957, was shameful. He also called for the censorship of rowdy secular music that made its way into southern churches. Denominations needed to create lists of acceptable performers to protect them from the “racketeers who prey on churches,” or scoundrels, masquerading as “GOSPEL SINGERS.”⁷⁰ A year later Martin Luther King, Jr. counseled a 17-year-old who wrote to King’s *Ebony* advice column: “The real question is whether one can be consistent in playing gospel music and rock and roll music simultaneous,” he warned. “The two are totally incompatible.”⁷¹ Rock, in King’s estimation, was hardly dignified.

Additional church leaders in the 1940s and 1950s worried that popular music, syncopated beats, and boogie-woogie piano were tainting white as well as black gospel music. Like Brewster, they thought churches should fortify themselves against the encroachments of worldly entertainment. For instance, at their annual meeting in the summer of 1956, New Jersey Seventh-day Adventists denounced all those songsmiths who, “are capitalizing on the current religious revival in the form of platter-chatter and gospel boogie.” Little Richard’s denomination had nothing but condemnation for the star’s rock hits and rock’s influence. Church officials finally warned: “It is impossible to harmonize holiness and

⁷⁰ “‘Rock ‘n’ roll Church Singing Must Go,’ Says Dr. Brewster,” *Cleveland Call and Post*, February 9, 1957, 6B. See also George E. Pitts, “Rock ‘n’ Roll Department: A Churchman Speaks . . .,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, September 22, 1956, A22; George E. Pitts, “Religious Assembly Cracks Down on Jazzy Spirituals,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 25, 1958, 20; and “Ministers Still Protest ‘Swinging’ Gospel Tunes,” *Chicago Defender*, August 31, 1960, 17.

⁷¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Advice for Living,” *Ebony* (April 1958): 392. Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding*, 189

hep-cats, sanctification and swing.”⁷² Already in 1938 one harsh critic of jazz, who attended a Benny Goodman concert in Cleveland, Ohio, made the links between the new music and the pentecostal faith explicit. Was swing music “really as bad as I thought it was,” he asked. It was. His mind raced back to the camp meetings his parents forced him to attend in his youth, wherein a “much publicized evangelist who knew how to play on the heart strings” would cast his spell over the gathering. Goodman’s show, the dancing, and the whole scene reminded him of “the halls where Holy Rollers held their meetings in the camps of colored people of the southland.” Concertgoers, like ecstatic worshippers, “gave free rein to their emotions when someone tapped the right nerve.”⁷³ In the following decade another anxious commentator in a gospel music magazine cautioned against songs like the Homeland Harmony Quartet’s 1948 rendition of “Everybody Gonna Have a Wonderful Time Up There (Gospel Boogie),” which had been popularized by Sister Rosetta Tharpe. “Why should men who are supposed to love the Lord make for their most popular phonograph records and ‘song-hits’ the type of song that is too cheap in the light of God’s holy purpose to deserve mention?” asked the critic with outright disgust. The popular new style of gospel music appeared to such naysayers to be dangerously close to the debased secular music of the age.⁷⁴

In the mid-1950s questions concerning the direction of influence gave way to intense debate. The dispute about the links between rock and roll or rhythm and blues and church music exploded in the pages of African-American newspapers across the country. In 1955

⁷² “Rock-and-Roll Religion,” *Christian Herald* (September 1956): 12.

⁷³ W. G. Vorpe, “As the Parade Passes By,” *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, 1938, 2. If that was not enough, other concerned churchmen were far more specific.

⁷⁴ Quote from Don Cusic, *The Sound Of Light: A History of Gospel and Christian Music* (Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard, 2002), 191.

the rhythm and blues singer LaVern Baker made the scandalous claim that gospel singers, like Philadelphia's Clara Ward, fired their music with a rock and roll beat. Baker recently rose to stardom with her 1955 Atlantic Records hit "Tweedle Dee." Ward, who with the Ward Singers toured alongside minister C.L. Franklin and played before crowds of up to 25,000, angrily shot back. "We've been singing gospel music long before the public ever heard of rock and roll," she told a reporter. She was not opposed to rock music, and actually enjoyed listening to it. But, in fact, claimed Ward, it was rock and pop performers who lifted from the gospel tradition, not the other way around. She asked: "Where else did they copy their styles but from church groups[?]"⁷⁵

Were popular performers using gospel melodies and styles for debased purposes? It certainly seemed so to churchgoers in the mid 1950s. An influential white Baptist preacher and broadcaster summed up the fears of many in 1956. "The 'spirituals' are the heartcry of a people for freedom and for God," he sternly observed. "Sadly, almost blasphemously," the minister lamented, "they have been taken over by the entertainment world in our day, their purpose misdirected, the melodies adapted to the cheapest of swing."⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Chaeryl A. Kirk-Duggan, "African American Hymnody," in *Encyclopedia of Women and Religion in North America*, eds., Rosemary Skinner Keller and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 992. Clara Ward quoted in "Clara Ward Denies She 'Rocks 'n Rolls,'" *Baltimore Afro-American*, November 26, 1955, 6. See also: "Blast on Gospel Singers' Style Pits Baker against Ward," *Chicago Defender*, November 26, 1955, 7; "Clara and LaVerne Argue Origin of the R & B Beat," *New Journal and Guide*, December 3, 1955, B20; "Rhythm and Blues not Stolen—Baker," *Philadelphia Tribune*, October 15, 1955, 11. For a similar debate, see "Is There too Much Rock 'n' roll in Religion?" *Color* 11:14 (January 1957): 12-13. Pearl Bailey claimed to have sung rockin' music at her "Holy Roller" brush arbor church in Virginia, which her father pastored, decades before. Larry Grove, "Pearl Says not Everybody Eatin' Beatle Jelly Beans," *Dallas Morning News*, September 18, 1964, 10.

⁷⁶ William Ward Ayer, "Are Demon Forces at Work in the World Today?" 7.

Quite a few of the faithful, then, watched with horror as Ray Charles borrowed heavily from church music for his unabashedly secular hits. Between 1953 and 1955 Charles experimented with spirituals, drawing sacred songs into the secular realm. In his hands “You Better Leave That Liar Alone” became “You Better Leave That Woman Alone.” A version of the latter appeared on his 1958 album *Yes, Indeed!!* (Atlantic) along with a song called “Lonely Avenue,” which Charles claimed was based on a popular spiritual Jess Whitaker sang with the Pilgrim Travellers. The most powerful and effective of these retooled spiritual numbers was the 1954 smash hit “I’ve Got a Woman,” co-written with Renolds Richard. The song drew closely from “It Must Be Jesus” by the Southern Tones. The coda repetition in Charles’s song, “she’s alright,” used the standard gospel form. “I’ve Got a Woman” climbed to number two on the rhythm and blues chart in 1955 and was one of the most-played jukebox hits of the year, beating out rivals like the Penguins’ “Earth Angel.” “I’ve Got a Woman” also helped usher in the new genre of soul music. The basic formula for so many of Charles’s early hits harkened back to the gospel quartets that inspired him as a youngster in Georgia. One of his favorites, the Dixie Hummingbirds, emerged from the black holiness tradition.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ David Ritz and Ray Charles, *Brother Ray: Ray Charles’ Own Story* (1978; reprint, Cambridge, MA: De Capo, 2004), 149, 150. Dave Headlam, “Appropriations of Blues and Gospel in Popular Music,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Blues and Gospel Music*, ed., Allan Moore (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 173-175. Though Ray Charles attended a Baptist church with his mother, these services seemed to feature some pentecostal elements. See, Ray Charles Robinson, Jr., with Mary Jane Ross, *You Don’t Know Me: Reflections of My Father* (New York: Harmony Books, 2010), 51-53. See also Milt Jackson quote about the influence of the sanctified church on black soul music in the 1950s in Lerone Bennett, Jr., “The Soul of Soul,” *Ebony* (December 1961): 116. “Most Played in Juke Boxes,” *Billboard*, March 25, 1955, 138. Horace C. Boyer, “Black Music Comes of Age,” *Black World* (November 1973): 43.

It is little wonder that the reaction to Charles's innovations was immediate and fierce. Even the Chicago blues legend Big Bill Broonzy thought Charles had taken things too far. Broonzy, who briefly worked as a pastor in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, said that although Charles had "got the blues, he's cryin' sanctified. He's mixing the blues with the spirituals."⁷⁸ Letters arrived in Charles's mailbox, accusing him of "bastardizing God's work," while a prominent preacher in New York City denounced the performer from his pulpit. Charles brushed it all off, later saying, "I really didn't give a shit about that kind of criticism."⁷⁹

With some trepidation, others followed Ray Charles's enormous success. Crossover stars, from gospel to pop, like Sam Cooke, Johnnie Taylor, Dionne Warwick, and Lou Rawls, produced chart-topping songs. In the 1960s Aretha Franklin perfected a pattern that had been well established, said critic Hollie West. Much like Charles had done before, where Franklin, "once said Jesus, she now cries baby. She hums and moans with the transfixed ecstasy of a church sister who's experiencing the Holy Ghost."⁸⁰

Without a doubt the line separating godly and worldly music had long been a thin one. Sometimes there was no line at all. The life and work of Thomas Dorsey, the father of the gospel blues, illustrates as much. In the middle of the Great Migration, he began his career in Chicago as the accompanist of blues sensation Ma Rainey, calling himself "Georgia Tom."

⁷⁸ Big Bill Broonzy quoted in Ralph J. Gleason, "Ray Charles' Motto—'Singing is Believing,'" *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, December 27, 1959, 6H. See also Rick Coleman, *Blue Monday: Fats Domino and the Lost Dawn of Rock 'n' Roll* (Cambridge, MA: De Capo Press, 2006), 4-5. Michael Lydon, *Ray Charles: Man and Music* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 114.

⁷⁹ David Ritz and Ray Charles, *Brother Ray*, 151.

⁸⁰ Hollie I. West, "Mixing Gospel and the Blues," *Washington Post*, July 9, 1972, BW10. Francis Davis, *The History of the Blues: The Roots Music of the People* (Cambridge, MA: De Capo Press, 2003), 227. See the introduction of the "holy roller" theme in a review of Jackie Wilson's music and TV performance style, "Channel Time," *Los Angeles Tribune*, May 30, 1958, 18.

Alongside writing partner “Tampa Red” he composed double entendre blues songs in the late 1920s and early 1930s, with bawdy titles like “It’s Tight Like That,” “Pat That Bread,” “It’s All Worn Out,” and “Somebody’s Been Using That Thing.” His duet, “Show Me What You Got,” recorded with Kansas City Kitty in 1930, included racy lyrics about an old profession: “Come in mamma, you lookin’ mighty swell. Now, you say you got somethin’ to sell. So let me see what you got.” At the same time Dorsey, tugged in the direction of the church, was composing sacred songs for the National Baptist Convention and scoring his first big gospel hits like “If You See My Savior.”⁸¹ He eventually turned all his efforts to sacred music.

One black minister who bore the heavy influence of Dorsey mixed together blues, rock, and gospel with surprising ease. “Rock & roll has just about brought about the disintegration of our civilization,” thundered Elder Charles D. Beck in 1956 in a legendary recorded Memphis, Tennessee, sermon. As he shouted down rock ‘n’ roll records and the bad influence of performers, his backing guitarist plucked rocking blues licks on an electric guitar and the pianist played bluesy trills. Beck peppered his delivery with long, gravel-throated shouts of “Oh Lord!” and “Yeah!” while “Amen!” shot back from the congregation. Referring to impending judgment, he howled: “this whole world is gonna rock and roll!” The

⁸¹ Gerri Hirshey, *Nowhere To Run: The Story of Soul Music* (London: Macmillan, 1984), 26-27; Michael W. Harris, *The Rise of Gospel Blues: The Music of Thomas Andrew Dorsey in the Urban Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 148-150; Ross Laird, *Brunswick Records: Chicago and Regional Sessions* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), 1045, 1083, 1163, 1174, 1183; “Prominent Visitors,” *Chicago Defender*, September 13, 1930, 13; Edward Moore, “Recent Disk Recordings Will Please Ravel, Schumann Fans,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 30, 1930, F5. For more on the interplay of African-American blues and gospel music, see Paul Harvey, *Through the Storm, Through the Night: A History of African American Christianity* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2011), 102-105; Burton William Peretti, *Lift Every Voice: The History of African American Music* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), 129-138; Jeff Todd Titon, “Labels: Identifying the Categories of Blues and Gospel,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Blues and Gospel Music*, ed., Allan Moore (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 13-19.

closeness of Beck's raucous, gospel blues style to current rhythm and blues as well as rock was unmistakable.⁸²

Only a handful of white and black ministers actually came to the defense of blues or rock 'n' roll music. Though none would have defended deliberately salacious songs like those Georgia Tom composed. In early 1957 the black pastor of Jersey City's Deliverance Temple challenged all those naysayers who linked Elvis Presley with juvenile delinquency and immorality. In a forceful sermon Milton Perry noted that Elvis, unlike Ray Charles, did not rework gospel songs into secular ones. Moreover, Elvis, said Perry, was raised in a strict Assemblies of God home, "a home of Orthodox 'sanctified Pentecostal' parents who taught a boy to love and fear God." This also accounts, the minister speculated, "for Presley's abstention from tobacco and alcoholic beverages." Perry was particularly impressed, after a visit to Memphis, with what he heard about how the young rock 'n' roll star conducted himself. By all accounts Elvis was humble, polite, and progressive on the race issue. Stories of Elvis's participating in a charity event for orphaned and needy black children impressed the preacher greatly. So to did positive anecdotes of Elvis's interaction with Memphis's black community.⁸³

More often than not, when Elvis hit the big time in 1956, pentecostals all over the South were eager to distance themselves from him. He might claim to be a member of an

⁸² Elder Beck, "Rock and Roll Sermon" (1956), on *Fire In My Bones: Raw + Rare + Otherworldly African-American Gospel, 1944-2007* (New York: Tompkins Square, 2009). Evelyn M.E. Taylor, "Beck, Elder Charles D.," in *Encyclopedia of American Gospel Music ed., W.K. McNeil* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 33-34.

⁸³ Milton Perry, "A Minister in Defense of Elvis," *Cleveland Call and Post*, January 19, 1957, 7A. See also the remarks of songwriter Samuel "Buck" Ram in Hal Boyle, "Rock 'n' Roll Defended as Descendant of Gospel Hymn," *Ocala Star-Banner* (Ocala, FL), August 23, 1956; "Minister Says Rock-n-Roll True U.S. Art," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 17, 1957, SW16; and "It Can't Be that Bad!" *Baltimore Afro-American*, July 28, 1956, 4.

Assemblies of God church, they intoned, but he certainly didn't behave like one of the saints. "I am sure you agree," a congregant from Richmond wrote to the Assemblies' general superintendent, "that this boy certainly should not be allowed to be member of any 'Bible believing' church." A Macon, Georgia Sunday school teacher told the superintendent that she was "stunned over this thing they call 'Rock & Roll Music.'"⁸⁴ All the light and heat generated by concerned lay people and pulpit pounders obscured the religious roots of the new music.

Some pentecostals did sense that the scenes at rock concerts looked a little too much like a holy-ghost revival. Pentecostal youth pastor and later author of the influential book *The Cross and the Switchblade*, David Wilkerson saw the connection between rock 'n' roll and sanctified music all too clearly. In 1959 he railed against rock, a godless cult. For each Youth for Christ rally "Satan is now staging a rock and roll rally!" Wilkerson blasted. "Satan has used rock and roll to imitate the work of God at Pentecost!" As the world was approaching its final hour "Satan has come down to baptize with an *unholy ghost* and *unholy fire*!" In his estimation rock concerts looked shockingly like perverted pentecostal services: "the shaking, the prostration, the tongues" at rock shows "are imitated by this unholy baptism—as far even to speaking in vile tongues!" Wilkerson continued with these themes in a small pamphlet he published that he intended to warn teens that rock and roll "is the pulse and tempo of hell! It is not music—it is not a dance—it is not energetic exercise—ROCK AND ROLL IS A RELIGION! IT IS A CULT! IT IS A SUPERNATURAL

⁸⁴ Mrs. Earl H. Clements, Richmond, VA, to Ralph M. Riggs, Springfield, MO, August 4, 1956; Mrs. George Arnold, Macon, GA, to Ralph M. Riggs, Springfield, MO, September 29, 1956; and G. P. Hertweck, Hattiesburg, MS, to Ralph M. Riggs, Springfield, MO, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, MO.

MANIFESTATION FROM HELL.” The new genre, hardly a harmless fad, was an “invention of Satan to ensnare and enslave the millions of 20th century teenagers.” The up-and-coming youth leader pointed out that on the day of Pentecost the followers of Jesus received power to preach from Christ. Elvis, by contrast, “RECEIVED POWER from below.” His startling rise to national and international fame could only be explained, Wilkerson figured, as the payoff from his bargain with Lucifer.⁸⁵ Another pentecostal, Tennessee’s self-anointed “King of the World” Homer A. Tomlinson agreed. Presley was only a “guitarist and singer from one of our churches in Mississippi.” And Elvis’s wiggling was “just a vulgar adaptation of our dancing and rejoicing in the Spirit of God in our Church of God services.”⁸⁶

Elvis, who could be quite sensitive about aspersions cast on him, commented now and then on about what he saw as a kind of persecution. To a reporter in Louisiana he remarked: “If there wasn’t somebody on my side, I’d be lost.” He went on to say, “There’s people, regardless of who you are or what you do, there’s gonna be people that don’t like ya.” Adding to what appeared to be a martyr complex, Elvis then commented, “There were people that didn’t like Jesus Christ. They killed him. And Jesus Christ was a perfect man.”⁸⁷

Youth for Christ magazine, an outlet for Billy Graham and mainstream evangelicalism, featured numerous articles on rock and roll music in the late 1950s. All were negative and most took direct aim at the King of Rock ‘n’ Roll. None of rock’s detractors in

⁸⁵ David Wilkerson, “Rock and Roll: The Devil’s Heartbeat,” *Pentecostal Evangel*, July 12, 1959, 4. David R. Wilkerson, “THE DEVIL’S HEARTBEAT ROCK AND ROLL! Teenage Sins Exposed! (Philipsburg, PA: Teen-Age Evangelism, n.d.), 3, 8.

⁸⁶ Homer Tomlinson, *The Shout of a King*, (Queens, NY: The Church of God, U.S.A. Headquarters, 1968), 21.

⁸⁷ Jim Stewart radio interview with Elvis Presley, New Orleans, Louisiana, July 10, 1956, in *Elvis Presley: The Complete Interviews from 1955-1977* (UK: Synergie OMP, 2011).

its pages described the wild music, as did Wilkerson, as a kind of inverted pentecostalism. Yet some detected that the music took something that could have been beautiful, true, and godly and twisted it into something gnarled and hideous. One teenage girl who wrote a short piece for *Youth for Christ Magazine* in the fall of 1956 picked up on that common theme. “Elvis Presley has taken the graceful harmony of God’s music and transformed it to that which is contrary to God’s purpose.” She concluded with a lament: “How much better it would be if Elvis Presley were singing and making melody in his heart to the Lord.” In fitting with the name of the magazine, another young woman surmised that Elvis needed Christ in his life. “Because of his church background,” she reasoned, “I feel that if we Christians would really pray, we would see the Lord work with Elvis . . . I detest all he stands for, but I would love to see him won to Christ.”⁸⁸

Responding to such rebukes, one high-profile rocker traded stardom for a pentecostal ministry. Jimmie Rodgers Snow, the son of country legend Hank Snow, counted Elvis and Buddy Holly as friends and toured the US with the former. Still very young, he landed a record contract with RCA, producing minor hits like the innocent “The Rules of Love” (1958).⁸⁹ In the late 1950s Snow felt torn between his pentecostal church, which he began attending with a girlfriend, and the unbridled life of a rock ‘n’ roll celebrity. In late 1957

⁸⁸ Barbara Lee Fridinger, “His Singing Causes Demolition,” and Nancy Astinger, “He Needs Christ,” in “Special Panel: What about Elvis Presley?” *Youth for Christ* (November 1956): 18, 19. See how the controversy from such articles played out in the letters to the editor section of the magazine, “Presley, Pro and Con,” *Youth for Christ* (January 1957): 6-7; “More Patter on Presley,” *Youth for Christ* (February 1957): 6-7; “Elvis is Back,” *Youth for Christ* (March 1957): 6-7; “Elvis is Back,” *Youth for Christ* (May 1957), 4-5. See also,

⁸⁹ Bill Sachs, “Folk Talent and Tunes,” *Billboard*, August 13, 1955, 24. *RCA Victor Country and Western Attraction Presents the Caravan Souvenir Folio* (Madison, TN: Jamboree Attractions, circa 1953/4), 15, Rare Books and Scores, souvenir booklets, Center for Popular Music, Middle Tennessee State University. “Second Generation—A Family the Picks Together . . .” *Billboard*, October 18, 1969, 38.

Snow confessed to Elvis that he was thinking of becoming a preacher. Presley was glad to hear it, though, he surely did not realize that Snow would become a thundering anti-rock evangelist.⁹⁰

Even before officially entering the ministry Snow took to the pulpit to testify of his conversion experience and to convince fellow pentecostals, teens and their parents, that rock music led to all kinds of vice and was destroying the country. In a short 1961 essay he penned for his denomination's youth magazine he recalled his close friendship with Elvis, and the things he figured he was best at before being saved from the fires of hell: "lying, stealing, and telling dirty jokes." He felt pursued by God. Eventually he "cut all ties with show business and started preaching full time for the Lord." God then gave him special power and boldness to preach, claimed Snow. He wrote this testimony for teens, he said, "to show you the depths the devil can pull you down to. He hates you and wants to destroy you," he said bluntly. But salvation was at hand for anyone.⁹¹

With so much scrutiny and negative attention from religious and secular quarters, it is no wonder that a few early rockers felt scorched by guilt. Raised on turn-or-burn theology, like Jimmie Snow had been, they harbored grave doubts about the music they played and the lives they led. Jerry Lee Lewis famously wrestled throughout his career with a deep sense of conviction. The Killer's baroque hedonism—womanizing, drugs, alcohol, and accompanying violent behavior—only added to his gargantuan sense of remorse. While the tape rolled

⁹⁰ Peter Guralnick, *Last Train to Memphis*, 447. Jimmie Rodgers Snow quoted in "Jimmy Snow Smears R&R; Presley's Ex-Aid, Now an Evangelist, Calls It Sinful," *Variety*, March 2, 1960, 1, 54. Jack Castleman, "That 'Evil Beat' of Rock Rapped," *Dallas Morning News*, September 25, 1961, 1. "Evangelist Jimmie Snow Files for Divorce," *Fort Scott Kansas Tribune*, August 15, 1972, 5. "Snow's Son Intense at Pulpit: Preacher Broadcasts from Opry Stage," *Lawrence Journal-World*, September 22, 1976, 34.

⁹¹ Jimmie Snow, "Called from 'Show Biz,'" *C. A. Herald* (January 1961): 5, 7.

during an October 1957 Sun Records session for “Great Balls of Fire,” Lewis preached on the evils of the devil’s music. Lewis, who had been expelled from a pentecostal bible school in 1950, turned to producer Sam Phillips:

Jerry Lee Lewis: H-E-L-L . . . that’s right. It says “MAKE MERRY with the JOY OF GOD, only.” But when it comes to worldly music, rock and roll, anythin’ like that, you’re in the world, and you haven’t come from out of the world, and you’re still a sinner. And you’re a sinner. You’re a sinner unless you be saved and born again, and be made as a little child, and walk before God, and be holy. And brother, I mean you got to be so pure, and no sin shall enter there. No SIN! Cause it says “no sin.” It don’t say just a little bit. It says, “no sin shall enter there.” Brother, not one little bit. You got to walk and TALK with God to go to heaven. . . .

Sam Phillips: Now Look, Jerry . . .

Lewis: Mr. Phillips, I don’t care . . . it ain’t what you believe. It’s what’s written in the BIBLE!

Phillips: Nah, gosh, it’s not what you believe, it’s how do you interpret the Bible.⁹²

Jerry Lee was not interested in the subtleties of Phillips’ hermeneutical argument. The Bible said what it said, Jerry Lee answered in typical pentecostal or fundamentalist fashion. The hard fact of rock’s sinfulness chased him like a demon.⁹³ As late as the 1970s Lewis still contemplated giving up showbiz for full time ministry. Other first generation rock and rollers, like Lewis, continued to sing religious music and, in some cases, devoted increasing attention to the Lord’s work.

Little Richard took up the call. A blazing comet on stage, Richard had one of the most tumultuous lives in the business. He flaunted his homosexuality, even though he was tormented by what he believed to be its innate sinfulness. The first draft of his 1955 hit song

⁹² “Studio Discussion between Sam Phillips, Jerry Lee Lewis, James Van Eaton and Billy Riley,” in *Good Rockin’ Tonight* (NP: Bop Cat Records, 1974).

⁹³ On the struggles rockers experienced between secular and sacred lives, see James M. Curtis, *Rock Eras: Interpretations of Music and Society, 1954-1984* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1987), 61.

“Tutti Frutti,” an homage to anal sex, included the lines: “Awop-Bop-a-Loo-Mop-a-Good Goddam” and “Tutti-Frutti good booty—if it don’t fit don’t force it. You can grease it, make it easy.” The record was sure to flop with lyrics so obscene. So, in production at a New Orleans studio he and the songs co-creators cleaned it up. The final version—replete with Richard’s gospel-tinged, high “whoa,” which he confessed to borrowing from the gospel legend Marion Williams—rose to the number two slot on *Billboard*’s Rhythm and Blues chart.⁹⁴ His career took flight. But he was still tormented relentlessly with inner doubts.

In 1957, after being confronted by a door-to-door preacher, Richard decided to give up the rock ‘n’ roll stage for the pulpit while on tour in Australia. It was an enormously costly decision. He walked away from half a million dollars in cancelled shows and faced a string of lawsuits.⁹⁵ To convince his doubtful saxophonist of his sincerity, Richard threw four diamond rings, valued at \$8,000, into Sydney’s Hunter River. Said Richard to a reporter, “If you want to live with the Lord, you can’t rock ‘n’ roll too. God doesn’t like it.” He added that he was preparing for the end of the world.⁹⁶ Richard then trained for the ministry at a small Seventh-day Adventist school in Alabama. His turnaround, however, proved short lived. He still enjoyed hanging out with young men more than with his wife and he couldn’t shake the rock music bug. In 1962 he signaled his rock comeback with shows in England alongside Sam Cooke and Gene Vincent. He later toured with a relatively unknown band called the Beatles. Would he perform gospel songs? Promoters eagerly informed fans that

⁹⁴ Marc Myers, “A Cultural Conversation with Little Richard: Richard, the First,” *Wall Street Journal*, August 10, 2010, D5.

⁹⁵ David Kirby, *Little Richard and the Birth of Rock ‘n’ Roll* (New York: Continuum, 2009), 154.

⁹⁶ Richard quoted in “Little Richard Gets the Call,” *Billboard*, October 21, 1957, 22.

“Little Richard has been booked purely as a rock and roll artist . . .”⁹⁷ Richard continued to record gospel music, though. And in the late 1970s he again quit rock music and denounced homosexuality. Then, in no uncertain terms, he declared: “I believe this kind of music is demonic. . . . I believe God wants people to turn from Rock ‘n’ Roll to the Rock of Ages.”⁹⁸

Like little Richard, Johnny Cash spent much of the 1960s struggling mightily with what he considered the power of sin. Unable to control his alcohol and amphetamine use, he reached a low point in the late 1960s. Cash underwent a second, very public, conversion experience in 1971 at Evangel Temple in Nashville, pastored by Jimmie Rodgers Snow. Thereafter Cash made frequent appearances at Billy Graham rallies and was the headline act at one of the first major Christian rock festivals in the country, Explo ’72, in Dallas, Texas. Over the years Cash continued to perform gospel music and released gospel records like *The Gospel Road* (1973), *A Believer Sings the Truth* (1979), *I Believe* (1985), and *Goin’ by the Book* (1990).⁹⁹

Elvis, too, recorded a variety of gospel albums and continued to sing hymns as part of his regular repertoire, especially from the time of his comeback in 1968 until his death in 1977. He loved to sermonize, even while wearing an amphetamine crown. The King’s Memphis mafia called him the “evangelist.” One of his favorite hymns was the bombastic “How Great Thou Art,” a 19th century evangelical standard.¹⁰⁰ Throughout his career Elvis

⁹⁷ Glenn C. Altschuler, *All Shook Up*, 162-163.

⁹⁸ Little Richard quoted in Charles White, *The Life and Times of Little Richard*, 197.

⁹⁹ Don Cusic, “Cash, Johnny,” in *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Christian Music*, 42. Bill C. Malone, *Don’t Get above Your Raisin’: Country Music and the Southern Working Class* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 110-111.

¹⁰⁰ Peter Guralnick, *Careless Love*, 209, 223, 231, 657. See Craig Mosher, “Ecstatic Sounds,” 100-101. Charles Reagan Wilson, “‘Just a Little Talk with Jesus’: Elvis Presley, Religious Music, and Southern Spirituality,” in *Southern Crossroads: Perspectives on Religion and*

performed live and made recordings with the Jordanaires and the Imperials, gospel quartets. For Elvis's final *Ed Sullivan Show* appearance on January 6, 1957 the former backed him on a version of the classic Thomas A. Dorsey song "Peace in the Valley." He was especially fond of singing gospel songs as a way to calm down after a high-stress performance. With backing by the Jordanaires, Elvis's "Crying in the Chapel" made it to number three on the American charts in 1965. The song also sat at number one on the British charts for two weeks that summer, briefly beating out the Beatles, who had been dominating the charts on both sides of the Atlantic. In this same period Elvis had become the highest paid star in Hollywood.¹⁰¹

All the while, Elvis was a religious seeker. Under the tutelage of his hairdresser cum guru Larry Geller, Elvis began to devour spiritualist and new age texts in 1964. A particular favorite was Timothy Leary's *The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (1964), which he coaxed members of his Memphis mafia to read as well. He also poured over the pages of Joseph Brenner's 1917 god-within book, *The Impersonal Life*, along with the writings of Indian holy man Paramahansa Yogananda, Krishnamurti, and the occultist and spirit medium Madame Blavatsky. Over the Christmas holiday of 1964-65 he experimented with LSD. (He spaced out by watching the sci-fi classic film *Time Machine* on television and eating pizza.) Still, Elvis, certainly not as conflicted as Jerry Lee, Little Richard, or Johnny Cash, continued to call himself a Christian, though he was stung by

Culture, eds., Walter H. Conser Jr. and Rodger M. Payne (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2008), 16-18. James R. Goff, Jr., "Conflicted by the Spirit: The Religious Life of Elvis Presley," *Assemblies of God Heritage* 28 (2008): 22-31. Alanna Nash, ed., *Elvis and the Memphis Mafia* (London: Autumn Press, 2005), 19.

¹⁰¹ Kevin Crouch and Tanja Crouch, *The Gospel According to Elvis* (London: Bobcat Books, 2007), 120; Peter Guralnick, *Careless Love*, 189.

rebukes from pulpits. He did not think that his dabbling in mysticism or numerology somehow meant that he was anything but a follower of Jesus.¹⁰²

America's most famous preacher Billy Graham certainly doubted Elvis's faith. In the 1950s and through much of the 1960s, Graham disparaged the rock 'n' roll craze. At the height of Presley's fame in 1957 Graham lamented that, "The American people are now plagued with a peculiar phenomenon of a young man whose songs emphasize the sensual, having the highest record sales and television audiences in the country." America's preacher asked how this could be. It was the mystery of iniquity, he declared, "ever working in the world for evil."¹⁰³

Despite Graham's certainty of the hellish origins of rock, the new genre bore the imprint of religion. The influence of pentecostalism on the first southern rockers to achieve national and international fame reveals the specific nature of that imprint. In an ironic twist at the same time that Graham and other critics condemned rock 'n' roll as the demonic soundtrack of immorality and juvenile delinquency, some commentators were linking the famous preacher with the Memphis rock and roller. They were both "popular heroes," claimed a critic in a May 20, 1957 issue of the *Hartford Courant*. At the time Graham was conducting his famous 16-week Madison Square Garden Crusade, in which over two million

¹⁰² Charles Reagan Wilson, "'Just a Little Talk with Jesus,'" 18; James R. Goff, Jr., "Conflicted by the Spirit: The Religious Life of Elvis Presley," *Assemblies of God Heritage* 28 (2008): 22-31; Peter Guralnick, *Careless Love*, 173-225; Jess Stearn and Larry Geller *Elvis' Search for God* (Murfreesboro, TN: Greenleaf Publications, 1998); Larry Geller, *Leaves of Elvis' Garden: The Song of His Soul* (Beverly Hills, CA: Bell Rock, 2007); Alanna Nash, ed., *Elvis and the Memphis Mafia*, 333-344; and Priscilla Beaulieu Presley and Sandra Harmon, *Elvis And Me* (New York: Putnam, 1985), 195-207.

¹⁰³ Billy Graham, *The Mystery of Iniquity* (Minneapolis: Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, 1957), n.p. Many thanks to Matthew Sutton for this source. See also George Burnham, "Billy Graham Talks to Teens," *C.A. Herald* (October 1957): 29.

would attend. Presley's "All Shook Up" topped the charts in the US, Canada, and the UK and his Technicolor blockbuster for Paramount, *Loving You*, had recently finished shooting. However different the entertainer and the revivalist might seem, wrote the critic, "Both are crowd pleasers. Both are handsome. Both spring from south of the Mason-Dixon line." And more importantly for the riled editorialist, both emerged from the "unsophisticated" realm of fundamentalism. Neither appealed to the intellect. With a parting shot the critic observed that their fame spoke ill of America. One of America's most celebrated novelists, John Steinbeck, added his voice to the denunciatory chorus. In an op-ed drenched with sarcasm, he upheld the supposed "great men" of our time: "Billy Graham and Elvis Presley."¹⁰⁴

The linking of America's premier evangelist and the king of rock 'n' roll was not entirely outrageous. The religious innovations of evangelicalism in general, and pentecostalism in particular, surely helped launch the vibrant new genre. By the mid-1950s both black and white pentecostals had long been using the newest technologies to deliver their message to the widest possible audience. Believers also played passionate music, used stuttered vocalization and syncopated singing, and practiced holy dancing like no other religious conservatives would. Gospel groups—including Elvis's favorites, the white Stamps Quartet and the black Golden Gate Quartet—sang and performed in ways that excited crowds and inspired early rock and rollers.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ "Two Popular Heroes," *Hartford Courant*, May 20, 1957, 10. For a rebuttal, see, William A. Webb, "Dr. Graham's Appeal Is to the Intellect," *Hartford Courant*, June 3, 1957, 10. John Steinbeck, "Bryan and Sunday Would Be Proud of Clement's Talk," *Washington Post*, August 15, 1956, 8. For similar critique, see "Graham Crusade Like Circus, Cleric Asserts," *Washington Post*, June 10, 1957, B6.

¹⁰⁵ Samuel A. Floyd, *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 64-65.

Looking back a little more than a decade after Little Richard, Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Johnny Cash first shot up the charts with their high-energy songs and stage antics, a critic at the African-American *Chicago Defender* reflected on the influence sanctified music exerted on rock and the rhythm and blues. It was ironic, thought Earl Calloway, that the church had become a “virtual training ground for the entertainment world.” He was sure that all the “energy, the music, style, the clapping of the hands, stomping of the feet, hoopin’ and hollerin’ are all a part of the sounds” these performers encountered in the sanctified holiness tradition.¹⁰⁶

In a region like the South—where religious institutions and religious culture were so pervasive—popular, or so-called non-religious music, certainly bore the stamp of religion. In addition, the religious, especially pentecostal, influences on rock shows that categories of religion and non-religion, or sacred and profane, do not reflect a more nuanced reality.¹⁰⁷ A greater appreciation for the pentecostal or sanctified roots of first generation rock and roll gives a fuller picture of the dynamic ways that religion influenced life in the South, and the nation as a whole, well beyond the walls of churches.

¹⁰⁶ Earl Calloway, “Gospel Music: The Basis for Rock an’ Roll Pop,” *Chicago Defender*, September 4, 1969, 18.

¹⁰⁷ Benson Saler, *Conceptualizing Religion: Immanent Anthropologists, Transcendent Natives, and Unbounded Categories* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 25. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 86, 79, 266, 446.