

Sacred Sounds: Belief & Society

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Throughout world history sacred sounds have served as a medium for human cultures to raise queries, advance beliefs, give praise, and inspire others to join in exploration of the mysteries of earthly existence and the greater universe.

Reflecting the widespread and growing public awareness of and interest in religious beliefs and spiritual meaning in everyday life, the 1997 Festival of American Folklife program *Sacred Sounds: Belief & Society* features a variety of religious and spiritual traditions. Through performances and discussions with Festival visitors, Festival participants from Old Regular Baptist communities in Kentucky, hip hop Christian worshipers from The Bronx, New York, African-American gospel choirs and quartets, representatives of South African indigenous-Christian blends of worship and popular music, and practitioners of Islamic and Judaic traditions in Jerusalem, among other religious and cultural communities, will share their perspectives and feelings about the intrinsic nature of their sacred cultures and the musical extensions of their faiths into the secular world.

Throughout world history sacred sounds have served as a medium for human cultures to raise queries, advance beliefs, give praise, and inspire others to join in exploration of the mysteries of earthly existence and the greater universe. These sacred sound traditions encompass a broad range of

expressive forms: melodic and repetitive vocalizations called chants; sharp, passionate, emotion-filled hums, groans, shouts; percussive, rhythmic hand claps and foot stomps; and extended song, sermon, and instrumental arrangements. Instrumental music, sung prayers, and mystical chants have been used to communicate with the divine, to unite religious communities, and to express moral, political, social, and economic aspirations. Sacred sounds in many traditions are the central means for invocation of the spirits. The utterance of particular sounds is thought by many cultures to form a connection to all the elements of the universe. In some belief systems music and sound vibrations are pathways for healing body, mind, and spirit. Among the wide range of human expressive behavior, the capacity to infuse the joys, sorrows, and humility that characterize religious and spiritual beliefs into oral poetry, chants, songs, and instrumental music is certainly one of the most powerful and inspirational ways all peoples and cultures acknowledge the spirit of the Supreme in their lives.

Although *secular* and *sacred* are terms used to distinguish worldly and temporal concerns from the realm of the universal and the eternal, sacred sounds are not necessarily restricted to formal settings in which religious rituals are performed for followers. Civil rights struggles, national democratic liberation movements, and union picket lines are a few of the non-sacred spaces where religious music has been consistently and meaningfully incorporated into worldly affairs.

In the United States the predominance of Christianity and its related sacred text may readily bring to mind familiar references to sacred sounds: "Make a joyful noise unto the Lord.... Come before his presence with singing" (Psalm 100: 1-2); "My Lord, He calls me by the thunder... the trumpets sound within my soul..." (from "Steal Away" [African-American spiritual]). Inside and outside of the United States many other religious and spiritual traditions in diverse cultural communities also express profound beliefs through sacred sounds. For example, the Upanishads — Vedic sacred treatises of ancient India — teach that "the essence of sacred knowledge is word and sound, and the essence of word and sound is [the hummed syllable] OM." Although the languages of many religious texts and

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Hip hop, a contemporary form of oral culture created predominantly by African-American and Puerto Rican youth of the South Bronx, finds expression in the Christian rap ministry of Brothers Inc. 4 Da Lord.

Photo © Alex Gomez

spoken rituals may be inaccessible to different cultural communities, sacred sounds are generally well received and understood as a means by which all cultures acknowledge higher states of wonder, consciousness, and order that transcend everyday thoughts, actions, and activities and connect one and all to the deeper recesses of the universe. Plato referred to “music as moral law ... the essence of order, [that] leads to all that is good, just and beautiful, of which it is the invisible, but nevertheless dazzling, passionate, and eternal form.”

Physical migrations and telecommunications bring the world’s religious cultures into new *mixed worship spaces*: increasingly, different religious services are held in the same place of worship at different times, and diverse religious services and styles of sacred music come into homes via radio and television. New encounters that bring previously isolated community worship traditions face to face sometimes challenge Plato’s “essence of order” and literally jar the religious and spiritual assumptions — and the very ears — of those of us unfamiliar with other sacred traditions and expressive cultural behavior. For example, according to a recent *Washington Post* report, one of the long-time parishioners of Calvary Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia, took offense at a “particular African-

style service” in which Ghanaian immigrants in the congregation brought forth “offerings with song and swirling dance, accompanied by drums, synthesizer and electric guitar.” On the other hand, the spiritual awareness of one of the church elders was expanded through the observance of a different cultural community’s approach to his faith: “I never felt the spirit so strongly.”

Festival visitors will meet a variety of religious practitioners and sacred sound performers whose religious and spiritual doctrines are quite similar in their acknowledgment of human existence in a grander scheme of organization created and ruled by a Supreme power(s). They will learn that each group (American Indian, Islamic, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Santería, Judaic, Mokhukhu of the Zion Christian Church of South Africa) may exhibit multiple variations on the sacred sounds of the same religious or spiritual doctrine. They will observe that, in communities defined by religious denomination, racial identity, cultural style, age group, and gender, sacred sounds are expressed through a rich variety of artistic forms, with a wide range of emotional intensity, in a broad spectrum of meditative tenors and creative participatory dynamics between performers and audiences.

Festival visitors will learn how the *lined-out singing* of

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the Old Regular Baptists from the coal-mining country of the southern Appalachian Mountains reflects a multi-cultural history of English/Scots/Irish-based American melodic traditions. They will witness the intensely expressed belief of the Zion Christian Church of South Africa — the largest Christian church on the continent of Africa — and hear how it melds traditional native religious beliefs and the teachings of Christian missionaries. Through intimate conversations with participants, visitors will learn about Asian Pacific American sacred

traditions, which are increasingly visible, audible, vibrant elements of new and old communities across the United States. Performers of *Santería*, a synthesis of West African Yoruba Orisha worship and Catholicism practiced in Cuba, the United States, and areas of South America, will demonstrate and inform visitors how cross-fertilization between culturally different worship traditions can lead to what is generally referred to as syncretism. In the case of *Santería*, song, instrumental music (*orus*), and dance are as central to the basic character of the religious ritual as the spoken word is in other religions.

Suggested Listening from the Smithsonian Folkways Collection

*Black American Religious Music
from Southeast Georgia*. 19.

*Festival of Japanese Music in
Hawaii*, Vol. 1. 8885.

*Old Believers: Songs of the
Nekrasov Cossacks*. 40462.

*Rhythms of Rapture: Sacred Musics
of Haitian Vodou*. 40464.

Sacred Rhythms of Cuban Santería.
40419.

*Wade in the Water: African
American Sacred Music
Traditions, Volumes 1-4*.
40076.

*Yoruba Drums from Benin,
West Africa*. 40440.

The narrative stage in the *Sacred Sounds* program is the setting in which visitors can pursue such questions as how the age-old process of passing different religious traditions and styles from one generation to the next interacts with the ever-changing popular music scene. Young visitors and adults can jointly inquire about *hip hop*, a highly popular music form among youth around the world that is a creative way for some of today's youth ministries, such as Brothers Inc. 4 Da Lord, to express their Christian faith — despite the fact that hip hop is roundly criticized for promotion of violence, misogyny, and vulgar language.

There is no substitute for direct experience with the vast array of sacred musical traditions that make up the human family. As sacred belief systems from around the world become more mobile and their musical traditions more evident in our home communities, we are afforded opportunities to visit different worship services and community festivals, make new acquaintances, and learn and appreciate first-hand the wondrous worlds of sacred sounds and beliefs. Sacred sound performers from throughout the country and around the world are also well documented and preserved in the archives of Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, a veritable museum of the air at the Smithsonian Center for Folklife Programs & Cultural Studies.

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