MUSIC AND SPIRITUALITY

THEOLOGICAL APPROACHES, EMPIRICAL METHODS, AND CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

EDITED BY
GEORGE CORBETT
AND SARAH MOERMAN

https://www.openbookpublishers.com

Cover image: Hans Memling, *Christ with Singing and Music-Making Angels* (1483–1494), Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp, Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Musicerende_engelen,_Hans_Memling,_(1483-1494),_Koninklijk_Museum_voor_Schone_Kunsten_Antwerpen,_779.jpg
Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpa

9. An Ethnomusicology of Spiritual Realities

Jeffers Engelhardt

In reflecting on the connection between music and spiritual realities, I begin this chapter by revisiting a performance of The Campbell Brothers at Amherst College in the mid-2000s. This brings me into a consideration of ethnomusicology's attitude toward religion and other-than-human agency in its disciplinary history and practices. As the field has moved from its positivist, comparative origins through its cultural turns and into non-secular methodologies, its story has been one that moves from disentangling music and religion as exchangeable secular categories toward recognising the entanglements of sound, spiritual realities, and ethnomusicologists. To make this movement tangible, I bring into conversation two ethnomusicologists of music and religion—Jeff Todd Titon and Melvin L. Butler—whose scholarly works exemplify 'disentangled' and 'entangled' ethnomusicology respectively. In conclusion, I connect their methodological positions back to the world of The Campbell Brothers.

I. The Campbell Brothers: 'Can You Feel It?'

The Campbell Brothers are widely celebrated bearers of the sacred steel gospel music tradition nurtured since the 1930s in the House of God (Keith Dominion) and Church of the Living God (Jewell Dominion) churches—African American Holiness-Pentecostal denominations found across the United States. Sacred steel gospel gets its sound and name from the foundational presence of pedal and lap steel guitar in the

style, introduced into the Keith Dominion by brothers Troman, Willie, and Henry Eason in the late 1930s/early 1940s and the Jewell Dominion by Lorenzo Harrison in the early 1940s. Steel guitars' presence in Keith and Jewell Dominions was part of the 'Hawaiian guitar' (kikā kila) vogue emerging from Joseph Kekuku's kī hōalu or slack-key style that transformed popular music in the United States in the early decades of the twentieth century.[1] In the following decades, Henry Nelson, Robert Randolph, Glenn Lee, Sonny Treadway, Aubrey Ghent, and The Campbell Brothers brought sacred steel closer to the gospel mainstream and, to varying degrees, into spaces beyond House of God and Church of the Living God worship.

At their Amherst performance, The Campbell Brothers—Chuck, Phillip, Carlton, and Darick Campbell—played material from their 2005 Ropeadope release *Can You Feel It?*[2] and gospel classics but not the 'praise', 'shout', and 'jamming' music of Holiness-Pentecostal worship that creates atmospheres in which listeners can 'fall out' in Holy Spirit-infused dance and glossolalia. The powers of sacred steel are many: the kinetic effects of up-tempo backbeat 'framming', the at-ease shuffle of a mid-tempo gospel hymn, or unexpected harmonic moves around a beloved melody. But it is the steel guitar's capacity to speak, sing, growl, sweeten, quake, and run melodically;[3] to weave around a rhythmic groove, flash across the fretboard, and tarry around pitches; and to dominate in volume, tone, and sound a church or performance venue in the hands of a master artist like the late Darick Campbell that defines the world of sacred steel. With exacting knob and pedal control over the onset and tonal qualities of their sound and the liquid slide of pitches under the steel bar, sacred steel guitars can sing as song surrogates in familiar hymns and gospel treatments—Darick Campbell's rendering of Sam Cooke's 'A Change Is Gonna Come'[4] spoke in this non-metaphorical sense to the Amherst audience. Sacred steel's proximity to the human

---

1   Robert Stone, *Sacred Steel: Inside an African American Steel Guitar Tradition* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2010).

2   The Campbell Brothers, *Can You Feel It?* (Ropeadope, 2005).

3   See Arhoolie Foundation, 'SACRED STEEL' [41:43], online video recording, *YouTube*, 6 April 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yRZS86tmvDA&t=2501s&ab_channel=ArhoolieFoundation

4   See Del Grace, 'Gospel of Sacred Steel—the Campbell Brothers 2020' [16:24], online video recording, *YouTube*, 25 February 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SGqaWjw1wyI&t=984s&ab_channel=DelGrace

voice centres it in House of God and Church of the Living God prayer and meditation by channelling a player's testimony, understanding of, and material contact with the word like a gospel singer. Famously, singers would stop singing to hear Henry Nelson speak through a sacred steel gospel hymn. Their tonal turns, articulations, and breathing rhythms intertwine the instrument, body, and familiar lyrics into an amplified, extended voice.[5] At other moments, sacred steel guitarists translate ecstatic gestures of praise and shout to their instrument through electrifying vibrato, growling sonorities, feverish accelerations of tempo and intensifying harmonic textures, and acrobatic leaps that both sonify and guide the holy dancing at the front of a church or, like at Amherst, the movement of bodies in a club space during the breakdown of a gospel blues number.

The sonic–spiritual power of sacred steel gospel moves from word to body and from Holiness-Pentecostal worship to non-church performance venues and back again, tracing 'interworldly'[6] paths between the spiritual and the material and transitions between forms of 'deep listening'[7] that may or may not involve relationships with other-than-human beings. Moving alongside one another, entrained by sacred steel's driving grooves, mentally taking up the words the guitar speaks, the bodies present at a Campbell Brothers performance foreground the 'problem' of musical experience and spiritual realities not only for scholars, but for believing musicians, non-religious audiences, and those positioned otherwise. This 'problem' is, of course, an artifact of a secularity that draws strong distinctions between spaces of religion and non-religion—a historically limited form of social imagination that nevertheless shapes music studies profoundly.

The Campbell Brothers spoke to this in conversation at Amherst, rearticulating histories of play between Saturday night and Sunday morning in Black music and the Black church, the misgivings of others

---

5   See Ashon T. Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016); Elisabeth Le Guin, *Boccherini's Body: An Essay in Carnal Musicology* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005); and Maurice O. Wallace, *King's Vibrato: Modernism, Blackness, and the Sonic Life of Martin Luther King Jr.* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022).

6   Braxton D. Shelley, *Healing for the Soul: Richard Smallwood, the Vamp, and the Gospel Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), p. 35.

7   Judith Becker, *Deep Listeners: Music, Emotion, and Trancing* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004).

about gospel musicians performing in non-church venues for the unsaved or extractive white listeners, and the personal and spiritual challenges they face because of their careers. Chuck Campbell, pedal steel player in The Campbell Brothers and, along with his brothers, raised in the family of Bishop Charles Campbell, described the dynamic of non-church performances: embodied responses to their music are outwardly similar in church and non-church atmospheres—hypothetically, a Holiness-Pentecostal believer and an unsaved fan could be dancing and moving the same way, side by side, expressing sonic experiences that index spiritual movement and/or performers' mastery. The ambiguity of these scripted, predictable movements in the affective atmospheres of church (is the shout 'authentic'?) and non-church (is that a fan or a believer?) performance was an everyday part of Chuck Campbell's musicking and religious life, and reconciling other-than-human agency and musical charisma in non-church sacred steel performance was something Campbell was happy to leave undone. For this reason, others in the House of God and Church of the Living God communities forestall the threat of ambiguity by swearing off non-church sacred steel performance, keeping the words it gives and the bodies it moves in the interworld of Holiness-Pentecostal worship.

II. Humans and Other-Than-Humans

My experience with The Campbell Brothers as a fan and in conversation helps clarify what is at stake in the ethnomusicology of spiritual realities. In my current work, I am grappling with ethnomusicology's attitude toward religion as a whole through the frame of other-than-human agency. A formidable question at the centre of this project cuts across music studies, anthropology, and theology: can other-than-human beings enter directly into ethnomusicology's record, or are they only ever present second-hand through the relational ontologies of humans and other-than-humans? It is possible to sit with Chuck Campbell's both/and position, a position echoed in ethnomusicology's current moment, emerging from its foundations in comparative positivist and exclusively human culturalist approaches. Ethnomusicology's both/and position might be: divine, other-than-human beings and sacred objects are agents in the world with social and sonic relationships to humans.

Divine, other-than-human beings and sacred objects become agents in the world through the sounds of ritual practice. Sacred sound, whether composed by humans or revealed to them, mediates—is in the midst of, as infrastructure—the binds between humans, the divine, and other-than-human beings. Performing sacred traditions can be an expedient means of accessing or strengthening social networks. Similarly, sacred sound realises transitions into life and into death, giving voice to the cosmologies, memories, and spaces of which it is part.

The invitation to address connections between music and spiritual realities is a timely one for me, writing here as an ethnomusicologist whose research and teaching never stray very far from music, religion, and questions of secular methods and critique. Ethnomusicologies at the intersections of music studies, sound studies, religious studies, and theology have, over the past decade or so, begun a turn toward non-secular methodologies and modes of representation. This is a continuing departure from much of ethnomusicology's disciplinary histories and extensive prehistories. Alongside its kindred, methodologically atheist or methodologically agnostic disciplines in the social sciences, mainstream ethnomusicology proceeded through the twentieth century on the basis of music being a 'humanly organised' category of sound.[8] The musicalisation of sound in this frame is an inherently secular move: music mediates human relationships, expression, and experience, and other-than-human agents are written out of ethnomusicology, scare-quoted as the 'voices of deities' or 'songs of spiritual beings' or 'revealed sounds'. In the field of ethnomusicology, which has carved out space for itself in the academy as a 'sciencing about music',[9] the sonic agency of other-than-human beings as listeners, gift-receivers, composers, sharers of knowledge, and communicators through sacred voice and materials had almost no place. For ethnomusicologists operating in worlds of secular critique and reproducible, rigorous analysis, other-than-human agency and one's position as a religious insider or as vulnerable to spiritual powers were framed out of the discipline. Ethnomusicologists could report on research participants' descriptions

---

8   John Blacking, *How Music Is Man?* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1973).

9   Alan P. Merriam, *The Anthropology of Music* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 25.

of the spiritual power and divine origins of music,[10] but they could not leverage sonic theologies or the knowledge of divine encounter. Theirs was a knowledge about practice rather than of practice; functionalist interpretations of divine audiences and ritual propriety rather than knowledge of the sonic–spiritual entanglements of human and other-than-human beings. For much of ethnomusicology's histories, then, addressing connections between music and spiritual realities meant wielding the blunt instrument of 'music' on the secular oxymoron of 'spiritual realities'.

III. Ethnomusicology, Religion, and Spiritual Realities

Ethnomusicology's histories are rooted in positivist anthropological, ethnological, and national/regional folklore collection projects and fraught comparative musicological projects in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Since its beginnings, ethnomusicology has had an abiding connection to religion as a culturalised, secular category of practice and experience; a category of difference in which music is (nearly) exclusively human, with gods, spirits, and other-than-humans disentangled from musical sound, behaviour, and experience. Unlike the concept of music, which has long been critiqued and rethought in light of different lexicons and ontologies and, more recently, as a discrete sonic object and kind of species-specific social practice within a broader field of sound, the concept of religion is, by and large, still taken as second nature within much ethnomusicology, despite a rich body of social scientific and humanistic work examining its particular Enlightenment, colonial, and secular genealogies.[11] There is not yet a strong sense of the extractive, colonising tendencies of designations like

---

10   See, for instance, David P. McAllester, *Enemy Way Music: A Study of Social and Esthetic Values as Seen in Navaho Music* (Cambridge, MA: Peabody Museum of American Archeology and Ethnology, 1954); Kristina Nelson, *The Art of Reciting the Qur'an* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1985); Regula Burckhardt Qureshi, *Sufi Music of India and Pakistan: Sound, Context and Meaning in Qawwali* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

11   Jim Sykes, *The Musical Gift: Sonic Generosity in Post-War Sri Lanka* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

Jewish music, music and Islam, Christian musical repertoires, or Vedic music theory, for instance. And, crucially, there is not yet a strong sense of how ethnomusicologists have written with and against the concept of religion as they attune themselves to sacred voices and places, endeavour to be 'with the gods in a musical way',[12] and preserve in-between spaces in which they are neither 'unwelcome inquisitors' in others' worlds nor renderers of those worlds in spaces ethnomusicologists 'dominate utterly'.[13]

At the same time, the sacredness of sound (its material and perceptual links to divine powers and right intentions)—established, in part, through the globalised origins and reach of Abrahamic and Dharmic tradition—has ingrained in ethnomusicologists a tendency to think in terms of religions (sometimes without enough distance from the transcendental aesthetics of European Romanticism that shape their habits of thought). Ethnomusicology operates through the making and recognition of religious genres, histories, repertoires, instruments, performers, and listeners or the common interpretive move of describing religious/secular/spiritual boundary maintenance and crossing. Although music and spiritual realities are entangled, secular ethnomusicologies disentangle them through the frame of religion. Beyond the mainstream of twentieth-century European and North American ethnomusicology, however, the situation can be different, with the connection between music and spiritual realities being commonplace. Some of the first 'musicologies' were 'sonic theologies'[14] described in the scriptural, poetic, and literary language of the Rig Veda,

---

12 Steven M. Friedson, *Remains of Ritual: Northern Gods in a Southern Land* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 8.

13 Richard C. Jankowsky, 'Music, Spirit Possession and the In-Between: Ethnomusicological Inquiry and the Challenge of Trance', *Ethnomusicology Forum* 16.2 (2007), 185–208 (at 191).

14 See Andrew Alter, 'Expressing Sonic Theology: Understanding Ritual Action in a Himalayan Festival', *Ethnomusicology Forum* 28.3 (2019), 321–37; Guy L. Beck, *Sonic Theology: Hinduism and Sacred Sound* (Charleston, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1993); Katherine J. Hagedorn, 'Toward a Theology of Sound', *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 34.2 (2006), https://bulletin.hds.harvard.edu/toward-a-theology-of-sound/; Eadem, '"Where the Transcendent Breaks into Time": Toward a Theology of Sound in Afro-Cuban Regla de Ochá', in *Theorizing Sound Writing*, ed. by Deborah Kapchan (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2017), pp. 216–32; and Jacob Neusner, *Judaism's Theological Voice: The Melody of the Talmud* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

Gītassara Sutta, Psalms of David, Epistles of Paul, and Sura 96 al-'Alaq. Texts like these, in turn, shaped the thinking of figures like Purandara Dasa, Yunqi Zhuhong, Maimonides, Augustine, and al-Ghazālī, who are central to sacred musicological traditions in their own right.

One can observe ethnomusicology shifting—however incompletely and in fits and starts—from a secular approach disentangling religion and music along cultural lines to a non-secular approach embracing the entanglements of humans and other-than-humans in ethnomusicological knowledge. Disentangling music and religion is a culturalist project ethnomusicology has been invested in for most of its history; entangling sound, humans, and other-than-humans is an ethnomusicology that transforms the secular relationship of music and religion. Simply put, the connection between music and spiritual realities is located in those entanglements.

To locate the transitions between disentangled and entangled ethnomusicologies, I will spend a moment here contrasting work that represents those approaches. Jeff Todd Titon and Melvin L. Butler are ethnomusicologists who theorise positionality, stance, belief, and secular/non-secular methodologies with great care in their scholarship. The two decades of overlap in Titon's and Butler's work (2000s–20s) offer us compelling models of disentangled and entangled ethnomusicologies inhabiting a common disciplinary moment within radically diverse soundscapes of Baptist and Pentecostal Christianities in the United States and the Caribbean and different scholarly projects. Titon, whose work I would characterise as secure in its agnostic methodology, is committed to bracketing off religious experience and other-than-human agency in understanding 'people making music';[15] Butler, whose work I would characterise as verging with a light touch into methodological theism, is committed to integrating his life as 'an academic and spiritual being'[16] through an epistemology grounded in musicking and the Holy Spirit. For a fuller accounting of how Titon's and Butler's held identities and positions shape their work, one must, of course, engage with the richness of their scholarship as a whole.

---

15   *Worlds of Music: An Introduction to the Music of the World's Peoples*, ed. by Jeff Todd Titon (New York: Schirmer Books, 1992), p. xxi.

16   Melvin L. Butler, 'Musical Style and Experience in a Brooklyn Pentecostal Church: An "Insider's" Perspective', *Current Musicology*, 70 (2000), 33–60 (at 38).

IV. Disentangled and Entangled Ethnomusicologies: Jeff Todd Titon and Melvin L. Butler

In *Powerhouse for God: Speech, Chant, and Song in an Appalachian Baptist Church*, and multiple theoretical reflections on ethnomusicological fieldwork in religious communities, Titon makes the case for a disentangled ethnomusicology that is deeply sympathetic to accounts of other-than-human agency in musical creation and relationship in religious experience.[17] At the same time, Titon, informed by decades of fieldwork with Baptist and Pentecostal Christians in the United States, approaches 'religious belief and practice as a cultural system'— religion as a secular form of difference in the culturalist vein familiar to ethnomusicology.[18] In other words, religion is not a different kind of difference. Titon's conviction is that a Husserlian bracketing of other-than-human agency and experiences of the sacred within the frame of culture is essential to ethnomusicology as a social science (as opposed to theology): 'I mean to be phenomenologically agnostic, "bracketing" or setting aside the question of whether their worldview is true or false outside of their cultural setting while representing them as if it is true within it'.[19] This means that Titon encounters the testimony of someone like Brother Belvin Hurt receiving a gospel song from the Holy Spirit as an element of religious belief to be examined for its relationship with musical behaviour.[20] Ethnographic accounts of other-than-human agency are bracketed and disentangled, with Titon moving on to an ethnomusicological analysis of the structure and lyrical content of Brother Hurt's song apart from his 'passive role'[21] in the composition

---

17   Jeff Todd Titon, *Powerhouse for God: Speech, Chant, and Song in an Appalachian Baptist Church,* 2nd ed. (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2018).

18   Jeff Todd Titon, 'Reflexivity and the Study of Religious Folklife', revised response delivered at the Annual Meeting of the American Folklore Society, 1989 (Unpublished manuscript, 1991), p. 5.

19   Ibid., 9. See also Titon, *Powerhouse for God*, pp. 477–78; and Jeff Todd Titon, 'Ethnography in the Study of Congregational Music', in *Studying Congregational Music: Key Issues, Methods, and Theoretical Perspectives*, ed. by Andrew Mall, Jeffers Engelhardt, and Monique Ingalls (New York: Routledge, 2021), pp. 64–80 (at 65).

20   Jeff Todd Titon, 'A Song from the Holy Spirit', *Ethnomusicology* 24.2 (1980), 223–31.

21   Ibid., 228.

process under the 'anointment of the Spirit'. Might the 'unusual'[22] structure of Brother Hurt's gospel song be attributed to the Holy Spirit, one wonders?

In an ethnomusicology where other-than-human agency is bracketed off, the humanness of musicking is definitive, and testimonies like Brother Hurt's become part of worldviews and culture. The bracketing moves of an agnostic methodology reserve the social scientific takeaways for human-centred, exclusively human explanations. 'No ethnomusicologist could maintain a scholarly reputation', Titon suggests, 'if he attributed the cause of the religious music and behavior he observed in the field to God. Instead, scholarly reputations have been built on insisting the opposite'.[23] But Titon is also unsatisfied with the exclusive secularity of a scientific paradigm that 'must absolutely reject all absolutist claims to truth'.[24] In later work, Titon seeks to understand the breath-based integration of Old Regular Baptist congregational singing in eastern Kentucky[25] being 'tuned up with the grace of God'— 'in step and deliberately just a bit out of phase'.[26] Early on, Titon did not apprehend how Old Regular Baptists' language of religious experience 'might serve as an explanation of what I considered a technical problem: the integration in their music'.[27] After some time, however, Titon arrives at a different place: 'Was it really metaphor when they spoke of being tuned up with the grace of God? When they spoke of how the Holy Spirit made a melody? Or was it not metaphor at all but their habitual way of thinking, their quite literal belief?'.[28]

This might be as far as an agnostic, disentangled ethnomusicology can take us without admitting the agency of other-than-humans. By listening for and identifying Old Regular Baptists' 'unerring sense for a long period', Titon brings us to the musicalisation of their belief in

---

22   Ibid., 226.
23   Jeff Todd Titon, 'Stance, Role, and Identity in Fieldwork among Folk Baptists and Pentecostals', *American Music* 3.1 (1985), 16–24 (at 22).
24   Ibid., 23.
25   See Various, *Songs of the Old Regular Baptists, Vol. 2* (Smithsonian Folkways, 2003).
26   Jeff Todd Titon, '"Tuned Up with the Grace of God"': Music and Experience among Old Regular Baptists', in *Music in American Religious Experience*, ed. by Philip V. Bohlman, Edith L. Blumhofer, and Maria M. Chow (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 311–34 (at 320).
27   Ibid., p. 326.
28   Ibid., p. 328.

a divine presence in their singing.[29] Their belief is still bracketed in relativist, cultural terms, however. Religion is, in Titon's final analysis, disentangled in the disciplinary norms of a secular ethnomusicology, mapping onto an emic/etic distinction at the boundary of religious belief.[30] Religion-as-belief, then, is a frame that fundamentally shapes Titon's ethnomusicology, and belief, it seems, extends to admitting the agency of other-than-humans into an ethnomusicological paradigm. While Titon is quick to point out that the difference across which the bracketing of belief operates is productive,[31] he leaves us at a firmly drawn disciplinary boundary: 'By resolutely projecting my role and maintaining my identity as a professional ethnomusicologist', Titon writes, 'I take my place among the unsaved'.[32]

But what about the professional ethnomusicologist who has a place among the saved in a community of religious belonging and practice,[33] whose 'epistemological home'[34] is at once inside the discipline of ethnomusicology and the world of Pentecostal saints, as in Butler's case? In *Island Gospel: Pentecostal Music and Identity in Jamaica and the United States* (2019) and multiple theoretical meditations on 'observant participation'[35] as a believing scholar, Butler models what a theistic methodology can mean for ethnomusicology. 'Because I share the religious beliefs of those whom I am studying', Butler writes, 'I must necessarily hold, for example, that the Holy Spirit is indeed real and is manifested through music. Furthermore, this manifestation is not subject to an individual's "belief" in it, nor is it limited to the "worldview" of a particular group of people'.[36] For Butler, there is no bracketing off of other-than-human agency, his religious experience, and the religious experiences of those

---

29   Ibid., p. 330.

30   Marcia Herndon, 'Insiders, Outsiders: Knowing Our Limits, Limiting Our Knowing', *The World of Music* 35.1 (1993), 63–80.

31   See Titon, 'Stance, Role, and Identity', 19. On the nuance this brings to essentialisms of religious insiders/outsiders, see Titon, 'Reflexivity and the Study of Religious Folklife', 8.

32   Titon, 'Stance, Role, and Identity', 18.

33   Melvin L. Butler, *Island Gospel: Pentecostal Music and Identity in Jamaica and the United States* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2019), p. 2.

34   Ibid., p. 13.

35   Barbara Tedlock, 'From Participant Observation to the Observation of Participation: The Emergence of Narrative Ethnography', *Journal of Anthropological Research* 47.1 (1991), 69–94.

36   Butler, 'Musical Style and Experience in a Brooklyn Pentecostal Church', 38.

he works with in an entangled ethnomusicology. His is a flat ontology in which other-than-humans are agents and in relationship with humans not as artifacts of belief (a culturalist approach in which religious beliefs and worldviews are attributes of secular difference, which Butler views as 'ontological colonialism'[37]), but as part of the real. What is bracketed in an entangled, non-secular ethnomusicology, in other words, is the question of cultural difference.

This effects a shift in perspective regarding questions that vex an exclusively secular ethnomusicology—questions of epistemology and ethnographic limits that are erased or bracketed through atheistic, agnostic, and ludic methodologies. Butler describes a moment of 'observation-as-worshipping' at the Glorious Rock Worship Center in Port-au-Prince, Haiti when

> ...a woman at the front right side of the sanctuary began to flail her arms and let out a series of shrieks. Falling to the ground and out of the view of all but those next to her, the woman was experiencing either the joyous touch of the Holy Spirit or an attack of an evil spirit—at least those are the two options into which most churchgoers would relegate her experience. But other Haitian Christians see the woman's apparently involuntary behavior in more nuanced terms. Perhaps it evidenced a spiritual experience more properly situated in the cracks of a rigid holy-evil dichotomy. Or perhaps this was, heaven forbid, a learned behavior—a performance of Pentecostal faith motivated by a desire to express a natural emotion.[38]

A secular approach to this moment moves quickly to questions of the veracity and pragmatism of the woman's experience of or response to 'heated' worship. In this paradigm, her actions were either an authentic expression of 'spiritual transcendence' (a term Butler prefers to 'trance' or 'possession' given his 'belief in the validity of Pentecostal experiences in general'[39]) and, therefore, bracketed beyond what is knowable, or a functional 'distractive outburst'[40] through which she could navigate

---

37   Ibid.
38   Melvin L. Butler, 'Performing Pannkotis Identity in Haiti', in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and World Christianities*, ed. by Suzel Ana Reily and Jonathan M. Dueck (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 606–28 (at 616).
39   Melvin L. Butler, '"Nou Kwe nan Sentespri" (We Believe in the Holy Spirit): Music, Ecstasy, and Identity in Haitian Pentecostal Worship', *Black Music Research Journal* 22.1 (2002), 85–125 (at 93, n. 9).
40   Butler, 'Performing Pannkotis Identity in Haiti', p. 617.

the social and spiritual textures of the moment. For Butler, being both the 'Pentecostal researcher' and 'researching Pentecostal',[41] however, this moment landed differently. Given the reality of other-than-human agents, Butler does not need to jump to questions of veracity and pragmatism; the presence of the Holy Spirit in that moment is not contingent on human belief or the authentic manifestation of spiritual transcendence. Instead, Butler's entangled ethnomusicology leads him to a critically nuanced understanding of the woman's 'distractive outburst as an element contributing to the worship service's success. It may have served to outline the limits of exuberance and/or as constructive evidence of the tangibility of spiritual forces'.[42] What gets him there? 'My past experiences in a wide variety of heated worship services', Butler writes,

> ...had prepared me not to know, to accept the uncertainty of it; I had gained a level of intellectual comfort that, despite (or perhaps because of) my allegiance to the faith, the 'legitimacy' of these kinds of practices—the question of whether they really 'are' spiritual manifestations—must lie outside my analytical frame.[43]

I read this 'outside' not as an agnostic bracketing off religion but as an outcome of Butler's epistemology of faith. Could one understand the effects of the woman's actions with such critical nuance within a secular ethnomusicology? Certainly so, and that is precisely my point here: an entangled ethnomusicology can arrive at a critical understanding of religious musicking whose place within the discipline is untroubled and untroubling. Without trying to represent another's subjective experience and lifeworld (or dispel the reality of other-than-human agency by reducing the woman's actions to performance), Butler unites epistemological humility and the reality of other-than-human agency known through not-unscientific methods of experience.[44] His alternation between first- and third-person ethnography is one of the

---

41 Butler, *Island Gospel*, p. 13.
42 Butler, 'Performing Pannkotis Identity in Haiti', p. 617.
43 Ibid., p. 616.
44 Melvin L. Butler, 'Researching Black Congregational Music from a Migratory Point of View: Methods, Challenges, and Strategies', in *Studying Congregational Music: Key Issues, Methods, and Theoretical Perspectives*, ed. by Andrew Mall et al. (London and New York: Routledge, 2021) pp. 174–92 (p. 184).

ways Butler negotiates a theistic methodology, weaving together the 'I' of experiential and faith-born knowledge with the 'they' of theological and positional difference.[45] For Butler, music is the sounding of human/ other-than-human relationships irreducible to culture, and his non-secular approach is part of a broader turn in ethnomusicology (including Titon's recent work in eco-ethnomusicology) that opens the discipline to networks of actors, ways of musical knowing, and positioned research less exclusive of other-than-human beings.

Conclusion

Past approaches to the question of what makes religious music religious[46] focused, by and large, on the humanness of music and the powers of sound to forge and bind religious communities or transmit religious ideologies. Style and tradition matter most here: an ethics of style in which what *sounds* good and right *is* good and right[47] and the reproduction of musical traditions that connect to religious orthodoxies and authentic routes of transmission.[48] Recent decolonising turns toward flat ontological approaches have begun to displace the centrality of the human in ethnomusicology. 'Taking, however, our research associates seriously', writes Bernd Brabec de Mori,

> ...we have to apply an ontological pluralism: Although we 'know' that spirits do not exist outside of the human mind, people in the community in question may likewise 'know' that they do exist, and that it is possible, and in certain circumstances perfectly reasonable, to socialize with a tree.[49]

---

45   Butler, '"Nou Kwe nan Sentespri" (We Believe in the Holy Spirit)', 94–95, n. 12.

46   Lois Ibsen al Faruqi, 'What Makes "Religious Music" Religious?', in *Sacred Sound: Music in Religious Thought and Practice*, ed. by Joyce L. Irwin (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983), pp. 21–34; Philip V. Bohlman, 'Is All Music Religious?', *Black Sacred Music* 8.1 (1994), 3–12.

47   Timothy Rommen, *Mek Some Noise: Gospel Music and the Ethics of Style in Trinidad* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007).

48   Jeffers Engelhardt, *Singing the Right Way: Orthodox Christians and Secular Enchantment in Estonia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Jaime Jones, 'Music, History, and the Sacred in South Asia', in *The Cambridge History of World Music*, ed. by Philip V. Bohlman (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Anna Schultz, *Singing a Hindu Nation: Marathi Devotional Performance and Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

49   Bernd Brabec de Mori, 'Musical Spirits and Powerful Voices: On the Origins of Song', *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 49 (2017), 114–28 (at 189).

I encounter this turn toward flat ontologies in the careful wording of scholars like Katherine Hagedorn who, in theorising a theology of sound in oricha worship, centres other-than-human agents unproblematically and without qualification:

> The batá drums are crucial in this performance process, because they not only respond to the praise songs offered by the lead singer and guide the movements of the congregants, but also speak to the orichas 'in their own language'. Consecrated batá drums are inhabited by an oricha known as Añá, who has the power to make the rhythms of the drums intelligible to the other orichas, so that the earthly pleas for manifestation of the deities through possession performance may be heard and understood by these divine entities.[50]

Positioned as an ethnomusicologist and Santería initiate, Hagedorn models in her non-secular methodology not only a connection between music and spiritual reality, but the selfsameness of sound, spirits, consecrated material, 'divine utterances',[51] and the real.

Returning to The Campbell Brothers, Chuck Campbell's clarification of his E-ninth tuning system being revealed or gifted by God is an invitation to listen and be moved through the sonic-material expression of other-than-human agency. In an interview with sacred steel scholar Robert Stone, Campbell speaks of his tuning system:

> Right, and it had a sound, the country western players didn't like. But it was the most beautiful sounding guitar I've ever had for church. And at that point, what I did then was had an E ninth up top, and I had it and the way I got my tuning, which is from God. You got to be.[52]

To turn from an ethnomusicology that humanises sound as music toward a flat ontology in which Campbell's tuning system 'from God' is as real as the dancing bodies of agnostic clubgoers gets us to a kind of ethnomusicology more capable of addressing the spiritual reality of music (not least as it pivots from humanist identity paradigms).[53] As

---

50   Hagedorn, 'Toward a Theology of Sound'.

51   Katherine J. Hagedorn, *Divine Utterances: The Performance of Afro-Cuban Santería* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001).

52   Robert L. Stone, 'Interview with Chuck Campbell', *Arhoolie Foundation*, 13 June 1996, https://arhoolie.org/sacred-steel-archive-chuck-campbell-interview/

53   See Lanlan Kuang, '(Un)consciousness? Music in the Daoist Context of Nonbeing', in *Music and Consciousness 2: Worlds, Practices, Modalities*, ed. by Ruth Herbert, David Clarke, and Eric Clarke (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp.

someone who may never be able to incorporate firsthand knowledge of other-than-human agency in their scholarship as meaningfully as Butler and Hagedorn have (I am not a sonic theologian), I am, nevertheless, committed to the decolonising non-secularity of their kind of ethnomusicology—an ethnomusicology that is not troubled by the reality of secular and non-secular positions at a Campbell Brothers performance and, crucially, is not burdened to prove the reality of the secular (the theoretical and organological genealogies of Chuck Campbell's tuning system) at the expense of the non-secular (the power of his tuning system to bring people into the Spirit). Human beings, of course, make music in performance and scholarship; but music, as a sonic channel of other-than-human agency, knowledge, and sense making, also makes us. That, for me, is the connection between music and spiritual realities music studies is beginning to address, transforming itself along the way.

306–34; Heather MacLachlan, 'Burmese Buddhist Monks, the Seventh Precept, and Cognitive Dissonance', *Asian Music* 53.1 (2022), 34–55.