

The Shout Band Tradition in the Southeastern United States

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The shout bands of the southeastern United States are a little-known trombone treasure. For much of the twentieth century, African-American brass players have formed bands in congregations of the United House of Prayer. These trombone bands are still flourishing, as important and popular today as they ever have been.

Churches of The United House of Prayer for All People on the Rock of the Apostolic Faith, founded in 1919 outside New Bedford, Massachusetts, are found in cities up and down the Southern Railway, the main line from Atlanta to Washington, DC. This railroad was a major route of black migration from the rural South to industrial centers of the North and South. Many cities large and small in Georgia, the Carolinas, and Virginia, lying along this main line, boast a House of Prayer and at least one such trombone band.

Trombones and sacred music: The United House of Prayer for All People

The word “shout” describes the singing style in many “Houses” and other African-American denominations. “Shout” is also understood to be movement. When moved by the Spirit, worshippers shout by dancing, jumping, stomping, or running, as well as literally shouting.

Trombones are considered to imitate closely the power of the human voice and have been used in the United House of Prayer since the late 1930s. According to Thomas Hanchett’s liner notes to a shout band compact disc recording,¹ the first documentation of the use of trombones in the House appeared 29 October 1938 in the *New Amsterdam* [New York] *News*.²

Composers have long been aware of the similarity between the timbre of the human voice and the trombone. The trombone’s association with church music began more than 400 years ago, and it has been fruitful. European composers of the Renaissance recognized the instrument’s compatibility with the voice, particularly in sacred music. Moravians in North Carolina and Pennsylvania have used the trombone choir for more than 250 years, particularly for death announcements and in Easter sunrise services. In the Moravians’ backyard the shout bands use the trombone not only to imitate singing, but also to express the full range of the human voice.

African-American poet James Weldon Johnson, in his 1927 collection *God’s Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse*, compares the trombone to the black preachers of his youth. These men were “trombones,” because the trombone is “the instrument possessing above all others the power to express the wide and varied range of emotions encompassed by the human voice—and with greater amplitude.”³ A preacher heard by Johnson at a black church in Kansas City prompted both this recollection and the very title of this book.

While James Weldon Johnson was preparing “God’s Trombones” in New York, Charles Manuel Grace was receiving notice in newspapers in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Grace, known as “Sweet Daddy,” was the founder and long-time spiritual leader of the United House of Prayer.

Sweet Daddy Grace was a unique figure in African-American culture. He was born in 1884 in the Cape Verde Islands and came to Massachusetts in 1903. In the United States he worked in a grocery store and later as a cook on the Southern Railway. He founded his first House of Prayer in 1919 in West Wareham, Massachusetts, and his first successful church in 1926 in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Charlotte, North Carolina. Brooklyn was part of the Second Ward of Charlotte, often referred to as the “Second City.” Its boundaries were South Brevard Street, East 4th Street, McDowell Street, and Independence Avenue.



Figure 1

Sweet Daddy Grace (photographer unknown;
used by permission of the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County).

Daddy Grace (Figure 1) was flamboyant—and controversial. He rode in a red, white, and blue Cadillac, frequently wore fur, and grew long red, white, and blue fingernails. He sold tea, coffee, soap, and magazines. The magazines, when held to the chest, were reputed to heal his followers. Even more controversial were Grace's claims to deity. He often boasted that he was not black, but that God made him black so that he could minister to the blacks. He is widely quoted to have said that he was a close friend of God, and later in life he said, "Never mind about God. Salvation is by Grace only.... Grace has given God a vacation, don't worry about him. If you sin against God, Grace can forgive you, but if you sin against Grace, God cannot save you."⁴ The pun on his own name was obviously intentional.

On 13 September 1926, just months after Daddy Grace arrived in town, the *Charlotte Observer* nervously reported on a gathering of 5,000 of Grace's followers at a local park. The *Observer* called the "House" an "elemental" religion, whose converts that day were



Figure 2

Lake baptism. Daddy Grace is under the umbrella
(Photo by Corbis Corporation; used by permission).

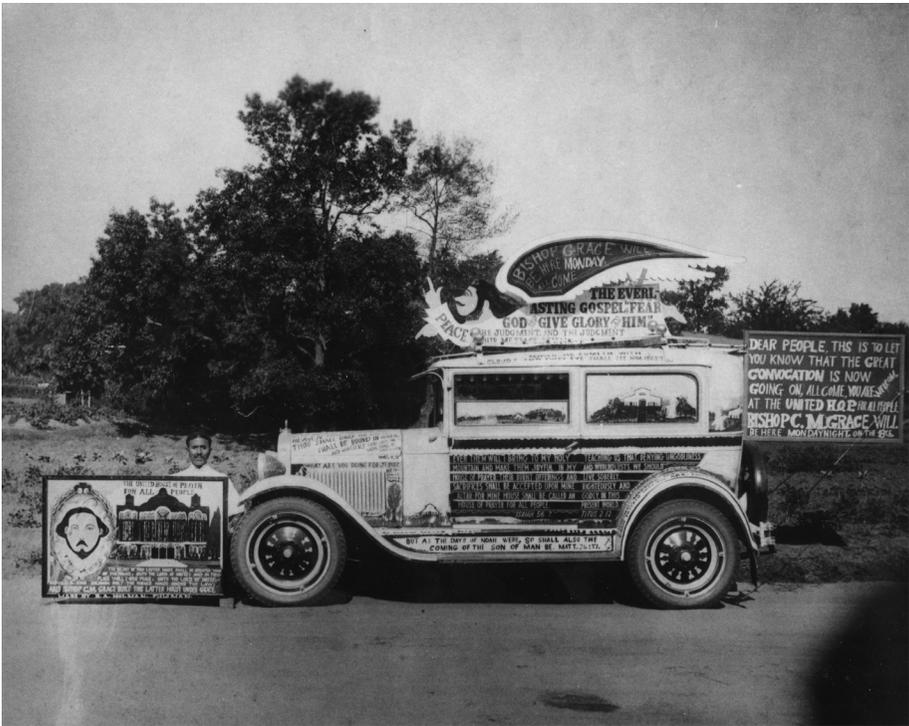


Figure 3
Daddy Grace's Car, with advertisements
(Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County;
used by permission).

"shouting, screaming, shivering and jumping up and down."⁵⁵ An equally hostile account in the *Charlotte News* compared services at the House of Prayer to "antics of uncivilized natives in the heart of the Dark Continent."⁵⁶

A.H. Fauset's landmark book *Black Gods of the Metropolis* suggests that the House is a sect in the Holiness tradition. He reports that the singing in a typical service is "interlarded with shrieks, handclapping, stamping ... and dancing on the sawdust-covered floor."⁵⁷ The United House of Prayer is also known for its outdoor baptisms at ponds in city parks (see Figure 2). Also common are its fire-hose baptisms, which continue to this day. Off-duty firemen are hired to open a hydrant and hundreds may be baptized at one time. Baptisms in ponds and lakes continue as well.

By the 1940s trombone shout bands had become an integral part of Grace's church. The spirited style of worship and the vast range of the trombone's voice made for a wonderful combination. For sixty years the shout band has been enhancing the worship at "Houses" in the Carolinas, Virginia, Georgia, Washington, DC, and New York.



Figure 4

The Tigers, Charlotte's #1 Band, led by Kenny Carr
(photograph by Craig Kridel; used by permission).

The typical shout band includes a lead trombone, three to five “row” trombones, baritone horn, sousaphone, and trap set. Most shout bands are composed exclusively of men, who come from all walks of life. (In recent times, some bands from smaller churches in the Charlotte area have allowed a woman or two to join. Some players remember an all-woman band that played briefly in Charlotte.) They often do not see themselves as musicians per se; they are simply “men of God” who gather to play and praise. Although some members may read music, most play primarily by ear. The men play with great enthusiasm and sincerity—players frequently assert that they play not to other musicians, but rather to the Lord. The leader stands in front, while the other players gather “round in a semicircle.” The leader typically dances and sways inside this semicircle. He is communicating with God, the audience, and his band. The other men stand as one body, shoulder-to-shoulder, and play to God with one voice.

Among the top shout bands in the country is the Tigers, a Charlotte group led by Kenny Carr. Although no longer associated with the House of Prayer, the Tigers were long referred to as “#1 band” because they played at the Mother House in Charlotte. Mother Houses in Grace’s church are similar to cathedrals. There are at least three, in Harlem, Washington, DC, and Charlotte. The original Charlotte Mother House was on South McDowell Street



Figure 5

Kenny Carr, signaling a “rise” to the Tigers
(photograph by Craig Kridel; used by permission).

at East Second Street in the Brooklyn neighborhood (Figure 6). Brooklyn was lost to urban renewal in the 1960s and '70s and the church was razed in 1970. The current Mother House is at 2321 Beatties Ford Road.

Shout music: repertoire and style

Traditional shout band music is up-tempo, in duple meter, and makes use of chordal ostinato patterns, fast vibrato, and bright timbre. Shout music is divided into several sections. Each section has a unique ostinato figure in the background. This rhythmic and melodic figure, called “backtimin’,” is played by the trombones and baritone horn while the sousaphone typically plays a “walking bass” line.

After a backtimin’ pattern has been exhausted, the leader moves the group on to the next figure. This change comes without warning to the casual listener; the group’s signal is called a “rise” and is a subtle melodic cue from the leader. The leader may also turn around to the band and give a signal with his trombone. The other players stand with shoulders touching and seem to communicate with each other by physical feeling as much as by eye and ear. This intense communication seems immune to outside distraction.

The group leader is easily heard over the ensemble because he stands in front of the “row” and frequently uses the upper register of the instrument. Lead players typically play



Figure 6

The first Mother House of the United House of Prayer in Charlotte,
McDowell Street at East Second Street
(photo courtesy of Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County).

in a range of approximately c^1-d^2 and even higher, while the “row” players play predominantly within the bass staff.

Shout bands are a living tradition, maintaining a style of music that has been performed in the Southeast for the past sixty years. The bands play traditional shout music, but also draw on jazz, gospel, blues, Dixieland, and any other style that is “real” and communicates the group’s message of praise.

Teaching shout music

Members of these bands view the ability to play trombone as a blessing from God. Players resist questions about teaching, learning, and training, saying instead that shout playing is a “spiritual gift, a revelation from God.”⁸ The Tigers have had little traditional training: some players originally learned trumpet or other instruments in public school programs. They made the switch by listening and watching. Other Tigers were given trombones at an early age. Either way, the learning process is aural and visual. Beginners learn by listening to the older players around them and by imitating their slide motion. Even when they are not holding a trombone, young players move their arms along with the music. (When older, experienced men are not playing, their slide arms often cannot remain quiet either.) The musicians insist, however, that their ability, opportunity, and inspiration come directly from God.

Nonetheless, the leaders of shout bands often take younger players aside for one-on-one instruction. These sessions are not concerned with the finer points of embouchure or technique. The leader communicates melody and rhythm, giving each student the chance to hear the leader’s voice directly. The student does what he can to match the leader’s powerful, spiritual voice.

New tunes are taught primarily by humming. The leader “gets” an idea, works out the main features in his head or on his horn, and passes it on to the others. He hums or plays a simple “lick,” and while the first player mimics those pitches, continues humming to the next player. Humming appears to have two purposes. It shows that each member hears his own line and can produce it. It is also a convenience—players get ideas at any time and can pass the ideas along to others while away from their trombones—while driving, on the phone, or gathered over a meal.

The lines of backtimin’ are layered until the thick, powerful ostinato pattern is “worked out.” The working out is somewhat democratic. Ideas evolve as new lines are added. Earlier lines may have to be modified to accommodate new ideas during the process. The finished product does not appear to change in performance, although the number of its repetitions might. Improvisation comes from the soloist only.

Shout bands represent a rich tradition of African-American church music. The tradition’s varied history and myriad styles appeal to many. For the trombonist, the bands offer a musical sound few have heard before. The emotional range of the instrument is dazzling. The bands’ enthusiasm for the instrument, combined with their unique harmonies, wide range, and fast vibrato create a sound that is unique to this genre.

Bands are active in churches in Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, Washington, D.C., and New York City. The McCollough Sons of Thunder (Harlem) played at Carnegie Hall in 1990 and at the White House for Hilary Clinton. Several of the bands appeared at Wolf Trap in the 1990s, including the Happyland Band (Newport News, Virginia), Madison's Lively Stones (Washington, D.C.), and the Clouds of Heaven (Charlotte). (Bishops McCollough and Madison are the successors to Daddy Grace and these bands have been named in their honor.) Still, the best place to hear a shout band is in a local church or at one of the many public appearances of the Tigers. Barring that, recordings of the Tigers and other bands are available (see Discography, below).

Shout bands are a rich discovery for all trombonists, who can learn from their technique, pedagogy, and most of all, their spirit. The shout band tradition has flourished for sixty years and it appears to be as healthy as ever.

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Discography

Make a Joyful Noise: Sound that Shout Band Brass. The Tigers, featuring Kenny Carr. Charlotte: Tigers Records/Right Lane Productions, 1998. (TRRLP991) (Liner notes by Matthew Hafar; for information on availability of this recording, see <http://edpsych.ed.sc.edu/kridel/html/tigers.htm>)

Saints' Paradise: Trombone Shout Bands from the United House of Prayer. Washington: Smithsonian Folkways, 1999. (SFW CD 40117)

NOTES

¹ The Tigers, *Dancing with Daddy G*, Fire Ant Records, 1993.

² *New Amsterdam News*, 29 October 1938.

³ James Weldon Johnson, *God's Trombones* (New York: Viking Press, 1927).

⁴ Arthur Huff Fauset, *Black Gods of the Metropolis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), 26.

⁵ *Charlotte Observer*, 13 September 1926.

⁶ *Charlotte News*, 16 October 1927.

⁷ Fauset, *Black Gods*, 27.

⁸ Kenny Carr, conversation with the author, 3 January 1998.

