

# Popular Gospel in the Caribbean: Gospel Video as a Site of Meaning

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## Abstract

This essay provides a perspective on aspects of the current trends within popular gospel culture in the Caribbean. It represents an important intervention, since there is relatively little published about this subject in academic and critical journals. This essay, therefore, introduces the reader to Caribbean popular gospel culture; provides an overview of the state of Caribbean gospel music culture; lists some of the global trends within gospel culture; zeros-in on the gospel music video as a site of cultural expression, and examines two main music video templates in western popular gospel culture; and shows how the Caribbean's leading chorale group of the late 1990s and early 2000s responds to and transgresses these western models. All in all, the essay provides a description of the kinds of influences that currently drive contemporary Caribbean gospel-music culture.

## Introduction

Like gospel culture in other regions of the world, Caribbean gospel culture has come under the powerful influence of western gospel and secular culture. In the same way that some peoples of Africa find it almost impossible to ignore western popular culture (Sanneh 1993), likewise many people of the Caribbean have come to live in the shadow of the entertainment and communications industry of the West.

African-Caribbean gospel culture is arguably one of the fastest growing areas of expression within the region. But in spite of the rapid advances, gospel culture still

remains an under-explored arena in cultural debate. Part of the reason for this is that gospel culture is not traditionally regarded as a legitimate site of popular expression. Critics on Caribbean culture in a global arena are much more inclined to discuss “the popular” in the context of secular cultural expression. This is ironic, since prophetic discourse points to the religious sphere as being at the center of human activity and destiny.

In *Culture @ the Cutting Edge*, I explored a range of issues relating to popular gospel culture (Best 2005: 54-90). This essay touches on some of those issues, but it also advances that earlier discussion. Here I grapple with areas of Caribbean cultural expression that still remain under-assessed. It wants to provide a brief overview of selected major influences on contemporary African-Caribbean gospel acts. It then finally goes on to examine how a leading Caribbean gospel group responds to the leading-edge methods and trends within popular gospel video aesthetics. How does religious activity appropriate technology to construct the message of salvation? How does it do so while at the same time confronting the belief that technology’s power foreshadows the end of life as we know and perceive of it? How does religious culture negotiate a path as we approach the “end-time”? This discussion represents an important undertaking, since the music/entertainment video form itself has hardly been understood within the Caribbean context. Academic discourse on the Caribbean gospel video format is even more remote. There is precious little academic writing about the impact of technology on Caribbean gospel and religious culture. Although this essay uses the Caribbean as a case study, there are many parallels with gospel culture in other regions of the world.

Caribbean gospel culture has always borrowed heavily from Western popular gospel culture. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century the influence from North America in particular is staggering. Part of the reason for this increased influence has to do with wider economic, political, religious and cultural developments. At the heart of this process of influence are the technologies that help transmit cultural data. As the global movements that seek to streamline world culture continue to forge their ideologies, it is worrying that anti-colonial movements worldwide have not fully recognized the technological arena as a pivotal site for the expansion of future global agendas. There is no better place to begin to examine the nature of inter-cultural negotiation than within the arena of religious practice and popular gospel culture.

The Caribbean music video has evolved in tandem with the development of Caribbean entertainment culture. The music video is in many respects a medium by which the state of entertainment culture can be gauged. The time, energies and ideologies that Caribbean performers and others have placed in such genres as music and Web videos make these important sources of information.

Before the late 1990s gospel and religious culture was not seriously perceived as an important category within the wider arena of Caribbean cultural expression. In

the 21<sup>st</sup> century this has changed somewhat. By the early 21<sup>st</sup> century expressions within gospel culture were more visible and better received by the wider society due to enhanced “professionalism” within several areas of religious culture. The movement by secular entertainers into the gospel arena also meant that there was greater lateral interplay of skills. There had always been this lateral movement from one domain to the other, but the early 2000s witnessed a heightening of this phenomenon. In spite of the many transformations being wrought within regional entertainment culture, gospel culture still held firmly to its roots in some respects and wrestled with questions about its very meaning, function, form and mission.

By the mid-2000s there were still relatively few financially successful gospel professional acts throughout the region. Gospel acts in the region have not generally recorded music and videos with the level of frequency as their counterparts in other secular musical genres. Since the purchasing market for gospel is not perceived to be very large this has affected the general desire to produce recordings. Whereas musicians in other categories have secured their up-keep and livelihood through audience patronage, this is not widely the case with gospel. Gospel acts have had to battle against the perception that the work of God should not be offered for sale, as obtains in the secular arena. Many attempts to operate as professionals have been met with firm rebuke by more conservative factions within Christendom. Some of the groups and individuals that have come under fire are Jerry Lloyd (Dominica), Grace Thrillers, Papa San, Marcia Griffiths (Jamaica), Promise; Bro Stephenson (aka “Lil’ Man”) Collymore (Barbados), Horella Goodwin, Shine the Light (St. Croix), Shawn Daniels, Sherwin Gardner, Royal Priesthood, (Trinidad and Tobago), Monty G (Bahamas), Judah Development (Antigua), New Life Ambassadors (St Vincent).

## Gospel Going Global

In the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Caribbean religious bodies and their members came under the influences that were affecting other believers throughout the world. In many cases individual participants within gospel culture were affected like participants within global secular culture. They were affected as members of their respective denominations, and as members of the local community. By the 21<sup>st</sup> century, even the Church operated with full view of all that was taking place within global culture. Increased access to newer forms of technology made this possible.

Caribbean gospel acts and their assemblies became increasingly aware of the changed arena in which ideological and spiritual battles were taking place. Denominations therefore consciously sought to propagate their messages through sponsoring and hosting their own church programmes, complete with their musical acts, on television and on radio. In many cases throughout the region, this has been the Church’s response to the global advent and expansion of digitized gospel.

Throughout the 1980s televangelism impacted the gospel ministry in the Caribbean. Jimmy Swaggart's ministry was extremely popular up until the late 1980s. In the 1990s the popularity of satellite television, the appeal of gospel networks like Trinity Broadcast Network continued to influence the format of some Caribbean gospel broadcasts. Satellite technology gave Caribbean and other world viewers full access to Western gospel networks. In the same way that other sectors of the society tuned in to Western secular popular culture, so too Christian viewers tuned in to American gospel television. Many found leadership and entertainment through these emerging centers of doctrine, habits and ideology. Trinity Broadcasting Network, which started in 1973, has become the world's leading Christian broadcasting network. Its influence and ambition has seen it diversify its product. It has produced one-on-one interviews with major celebrities, has inspired new progressive music videos and also entered into the domain of feature films. Its "The Omega Code" (1999) represents its commitment to offering an alternative to Hollywood fare. In 2003 it released the Stephen Baldwin starred "Fly Boys". In 2004 it promoted the new end-times thriller "Six: The Mark Unleashed". The TBN formula has revolved around the broadcast of programmes featuring established preachers, teachers, singers and selected celebrities. Its roster includes T.D. Jakes, Creflo Dollar, Rod Parsley, Benny Henn, Gerald Osteen. It has also showed converts like MC Hammer and Stephen Baldwin.

Many Caribbean and other viewers worldwide are heavily influenced by the "Word of Faith" and prosperity teachings of T.D. Jakes, Dollar and Parsley in particular. But TBN also spawned the immense interest in what the western Christian entertainment industry called the "Praise and Worship" movement. This movement was driven by a spiritual imperative of reassessing the role of traditional Biblical worship habits and appropriating them within contemporary contexts. This was one part of the Praise and Worship phenomenon. Another arm of the movement was commercially inspired and sought to maximize the returns that could be had from the careful, strategic branding of products. Praise and Worship music in particular led the way in confirming the popularity of artists like Michael W. Smith and Avalon as well as enriching the catalogue of established record labels like Integrity. On its "Company History" Webpage it boasts of being "the undisputed leader in praise and worship music, the fastest growing segment of the Christian music industry. Integrity ended 2000 with a remarkable fifty six percent market share of the praise and worship music products being sold in Christian retail outlets."<sup>1</sup> Non-western acts like those of the Caribbean have found it near impossible to break into the main course of this gospel sub-genre.

Caribbean believers were in many respects passive consumers of digitized gospel. Relatively few Caribbean performers actively participated as creators in this international movement. Leading singers and preachers from abroad in the West were invited to the region to conduct services, workshops and outreach activity.

There were very few leading theologians and performers from Africa. This has partly to do with the erroneous lingering perception that developing countries in the Southern hemisphere do not possess the intellectual and spiritual capital to share with their fellow believers. This process of dependence on the West is reflective of the entrenchment of the hierarchical relationship between so-called “first world” and “third world” cultures. There has been little reciprocation on the part of North American interests. Caribbean preachers and other performers were hardly accorded the opportunity that they themselves paid to their western colleagues. All in all however, Caribbean gospel popular culture developed with two main veins of emphasis. There was the spiritual arm that valorized the ushering in of God’s power on an advanced social order, and there was also the commercial wing, which sought for new ways of exploring and exploiting the transformations in gospel culture for greater economic returns. But yet, these driving principles were not distinct and separate. They were at times interlocked. There are performers who fit into the two categories, who are at once inspired by “the move of the spirit” to help usher in the new working of God, but who are also conscious of the need for financial upkeep and rewards. For the most part however, Caribbean gospel acts were dedicated to the greater spiritual cause.

Although Caribbean gospel broadcasts on television did not exhibit the same grandeur as that frequently projected on TBN, they nonetheless borrowed motifs and style from that network, on occasion. Caribbean broadcasts also established their own visual language and style. Many broadcasts by Caribbean denominations have tended to centre the spoken word. The major emphasis has tended to be on “the man of the hour”. Generally these broadcasts are free flowing productions. That is, they reflect the work of one or two camera positions, with little evidence of significant post-production editing. Many productions last the duration of twenty-five minutes. Various television stations have produced programmes devoted to promoting national gospel acts. But even most of these programmes are “live” in terms of the feed that is screened. They do not come across as vigorously post-produced segments. Because of this format therefore we cannot talk of these shows as possessing the tight production format that defines TBN’s method.

It is important to understand that Caribbean religious bodies, especially Evangelicals, vested much interest in traditional and emerging media in the new decade of the 2000s. While preachers and denominations spread the word through open air and actual visits into public spaces, they also used the medium of radio and television. Although the computer and newer technologies were fast becoming mediums of choice, many Caribbean religious bodies had not as yet found its facilities as rewarding as working through more traditional mediums. Like in the secular domain, Caribbean religious bodies also delayed their active participation in cyberspace.

Traditionally the music video is regarded as a supporting promotional tool,

and hardly an end within itself. In spite of its traditional function, entertainment companies have invested substantial energy into this market over the years of its popularisation, especially since the early 1980s. By the mid-1990s music entertainment television and video were serving an even more significant function as part of marketing initiatives; and by the mid-2000s evolving technologies like the Internet, mobile phones and other peripherals were changing the way that people produced and consumed videos. Worldwide, the gospel industry has devoted substantial attention to this genre as well. In the Caribbean, gospel music videos have not been widely produced by its artists. Many more groups dreamt of producing videos than those that actually did do so. Given the cost associated with traditional video production and given the traditional conservative outlook of Caribbean gospel culture, there have therefore been relatively few groups or artists that have consistently produced music videos throughout the decades of the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s. But there has nonetheless been a significant dissemination of gospel entertainment videos.

In spite of the inherent differences within gospel culture, there have always been attempts within the region to match the standards and trends set by leading-edge gospel acts from outside the region. Most of the gospel music videos seen by Caribbean audiences are predominantly those screened from the USA. Music video from North America has been the model for many regional videos in the religious as well as the secular domain. The divide between what is called white and black gospel, significantly tends to throw up two types of music video models that now currently influence the emerging crop of gospel artists

There is a difference between the music videos by acts like Newsboys and those by acts like Kirk Franklin.<sup>2</sup> Acts like the Newsboys, Michael W. Smith and Steven Curtis Chapman tend to approximate the music video styling of secular acts like R.E.M, Smashing Pumpkins and other alternative performers. In the sound mix of "Everybody Gets A Shot" by Newsboys the vocals are immersed within the musical mix of drums, bass guitar, lead guitar and synthesizers. In the video domain the high-powered sound clash of instruments is sequenced with an equally charged, cataclysmic projection of images. The video is the resultant of much post-production work. The images are cast from camera shot to camera shot, from angle to angle. The cameras, even when they zero-in on the lead vocalist, are hardly stable. They are constantly in motion. All in all the music video might appear to some audiences and to some film theorists as being chaotic and post-modernist.

The music video model provided by predominantly black gospel acts has proven to be more palatable to Caribbean gospel consumers and performers. Kirk Franklin's "You Are the Only One" and similar videos are admired by the majority of youths and by progressive popular gospel acts in the Caribbean. To the extent that Kirk Franklin's music can be said to have had the biggest impact on popular gospel acts

in the Caribbean between 1998 and 2003, many of these artists have also valorized his music video productions.

His “You Are the Only One” contains a number of features that differentiate it from the method of the Newsboys. The most striking difference is the tendency in many black gospel videos not to “hide” behind the technology, or remain inhibited by instruments. Whereas the Newsboys video is built on heavy simultaneous lighting and film editing, the Kirk Franklin video seems to free itself from the claustrophobia of that gospel video genre. The Franklin video claims to take place in an open American street. There is a lot of choreographed dancing, and the uniform wearing of outfits. The clothing colour motifs are yellow, red and blue. Franklin sports a bright yellow and green sweater-type shirt in some shots. The video is a defiant celebration of religious freedom. The musical score in this video is not gritty street hip hop, rather it is much closer to new jack swing or hip hop soul. Nonetheless, it is gospel with an attitude. It represents the left wing styling of black contemporary gospel in the USA.

In the Caribbean there is an expanding expressive gospel culture. Young people make up the majority of this movement, or body. Some of these are singers themselves, but mostly they are concertgoers or supporters of religious and associated events. This body of people is pretty much attuned to the happenings outside of the Caribbean. They are familiar with the leading gospel acts outside of the region and most would claim to like Kirk Franklin, Donny Mcklurkin, Michael W Smith and Yolanda Adams. Most performing popular gospel acts are also au fait with happenings at the cutting edge of international gospel and so aspire to emulate international acts. But much of this admiration and ambition is tempered by the recognition that American gospel operates within a different set up. While Caribbean gospel acts have therefore striven to keep up with trends taking place abroad, some performers have worked at their craft with a clear sense of what is possible and desirable in their cultural context. They therefore perform the gospel with full knowledge of the cultural politics that are attendant to even gospel culture.

### **A Caribbean Response: Grace Thrillers**

Caribbean gospel acts are very conscious of the types of videos produced by groups at the cutting edge of alternative and hip hop gospel internationally. Although most Caribbean gospel groups do not perform or produce gospel in these genres, they nonetheless sit in awe of such video productions. Although these are two dominant music video models, it is instructive that the Caribbean’s leading performing group of the 1990s and early 2000s the Jamaican vocal and musical group the Grace Thrillers, have built their popularity by way of other music video practices. Their music video collection called “Make Us One” represented a major effort by this Caribbean act when it was released. The Grace Thrillers was at the

peak of their popularity between the mid-1990s and early 2000s. Whereas the videos of even younger artists reflect a number of tensions that have to do with their negotiation of the liminal space between showmanship, entertainment and ministry, the Grace Thrillers seem to have faced none of this in their conceptualisation and production of their popular video collection “Make Us One”. Their “Make Us One” video can be read as an overt rejection of contemporary music video practices. In this video six video package the group seems to set out to position ministry and message above choreographed hype and the deification of technological excess.

As a singing group the Grace Thrillers have built their popularity around a very tightly spun formula. They have tended to rework familiar gospel standards and Negro spirituals. They have re-popularized these to mento, reggae and soul-oriented styling. Audiences have come to expect certain formulaic performances from this core vocal group and their band of musicians. Their tightly structured vocal harmonies, steady musical accompaniments, and clear delivery of the gospel message define the Grace Thrillers method of ministry. It is therefore not surprising that their videos try to capture and reproduce this very formula in the arena of multimedia display.

Overall the Grace Thrillers’ performance on this production has not gone beyond their well-established parameters. They have delivered what is expected. The production and performance on the title track “Make Us One” illustrates this. It begins with a blank/black screen. Sound takes over. The first sound is the words spoken by the male lead vocalist. This primary inscription of the speaking voice serves to establish the rooted-ness of the entire production in the spoken word, in The Word of God. As the male vocalist introduces the song, the camera, beginning from below the shoulder, slowly but predictably zooms in on his face, close-up. He declares:

The word of God says that we should serve the Lord our God with all our hearts all our souls all our strength, minds and we should love our neighbours as ourselves. There are many divisions in the world today and because of this we would like to dedicate this song to the nations of this earth.<sup>3</sup>

This introduction serves as a reminder to audiences that this packaged video performance is rooted in the evangelical Christian experience, which the performers feel can easily be lost to the glitz and glamour of the music video and its attendant technology. The centrality of The Word is again reinforced later in the song when the choral singing stops and there is a spoken word segment that introduces the voiceover of a female speaker. The words of her sermon come up on the screen, scrolling upwards to reinforce the message of the gospel. Of note also is the fact that



the speaking voice is not attributed to any of the performers, on screen. The production makes it abundantly clear that this is not the voice of any one of them, by clearly positioning all of the members in a wide shot, the director allows us to recognize that their mouths do not move. This method therefore calls attention to the centrality of the spoken Word. It also ascribes to the speaking voice an existence beyond the camera's all-embracing politics. Whereas the camera claims power of fashioning, fixing and controlling music videos generally, the Grace Thrillers video seems to challenge the camera/technology's claim to authority and control by ascribing power to the spoken Word:

Oh Lord God  
 Father of the Universe,  
 Creator of Heaven and Earth,  
 Look down on us your people  
 Living in a world torn  
 by war and strife....  
 Unite us lord  
 and  
 Make us one ... <sup>4</sup>

The spoken words here reconnect to those spoken initially before the cameras rolled to begin to capture video images. This reference to the earlier verbalisation not only establishes a cyclic pattern of interconnecting tropes within the production, but also suggests another kind of connectivity. Whereas the camera cannot always locate the voice, its source, the director situates the group as having found The Source.

The entire "Make Us One" music video production is filmed on location at a semi-outdoor guest facility with plants, flowers, arches and a smoothly cemented floor. The setting is carefully embellished with strategically positioned floral decorations. The ambience is conducive to reflection. The singers are presented as being in harmony with nature and the wider world outside the confines of the controlled filmed environment.

The camera shots for the entire production are already clearly defined in the opening video. The first shot is of the speaker, the second focuses on two singers waist-up, the third shot locates three singers from the waist up. The fourth shot is a wider shot that shows all of the chorale members in harmony at the end of the cappella chorus section of the song. This widening of the camera's visual reference locks home the song's imperative of advocating total, Caribbean and global harmony and unity.

Shots fade in and out of one another, but not in a disconcerting way, not to take one's attention away from the sound and the words. The soundtrack therefore

maintains a clear sense of importance throughout. There appear to be two cameras in operation. These two cameras interplay between close-up shots and wide shots, or set-left and set-right angles. They therefore help to maintain the video's interest at the visual level, without overpowering the other constituents of the production. There is every indication that post-production was minimized. Indeed there appears to have been a decided objective to limit the appearance of excessive technological intervention.

The singers change their costumes throughout. They dress alike in the first song of unity and in the last one, but in the other videos they change their attire. The video to the song "We Will Follow King Jesus" is the most daring. It is an up-tempo song and the camera and singers playfully indulge in zooming shots in the call and response section of the chorus. Here the shifting camera angles correspond with the antiphonal play between soloist and his chorus. But this is the exception on Grace Thriller videos. This type of visual pleasure is subsumed beneath the production's major imperatives. The most popular video technique is without doubt the fading in and out of frames. This is especially utilized in performances of slower songs like "Jesus is the One" and "I Love Him". The possible intention of this method is to convey an aura of wonder, transience and of the supernatural. Therefore in many instances the production situates three realities on the same screen at the same time and holds them, until they dissolve into one shot.

Not all groups over the past fifteen years have been as conservative as the Grace Thrillers. But most of them have had to negotiate the fragile terrain that constitutes Caribbean gospel. Some videos have revealed cleverly crafted productions that reinforce vocals, others have placed greater emphasis on other constituents. Artists like Papa San, Monty G, and Christafari privilege other music video production aesthetics, more readily identified with secular projects. Antigua and Barbuda's Judah Development is perhaps the group whose videos have traversed the thin line between technologically-ridden and lyrically-centred music video.

As virtual technology advances, more and more the people south of the equator, as in the Caribbean, are forced to stand outside of their own construction. Part of the challenge faced by Caribbean gospel artists who practice their craft in the age of the World Wide Web is how to employ this unstable technology. As the peoples of these regions contemplate their role in Ministry they are constantly faced with the question of what technology they will use. Who will be their models as they seek to relate to a closer-knit global community? How possible will it be to maintain a sense of loyalty to one's distinctive culturo-religious outlook? These are some of the questions that will face newer gospel artists and ministers of the gospel in the Caribbean, and other parts of the world.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See Integrity Music's chest-thumping declarations at their "Company History" page, <http://www.integritymusic.com/company/company.php?target=history/body.html>.
- <sup>2</sup> See in particular Newsboys' video of "Everybody Gets a Shot," from the album, *Step up to the Microphone*, Virgin / StarSong / Sparrow 1999. Video Director Michael Ashcraft. And Kirk Franklin's video, "You are the Only One," from the album, *God's Property*, Gospocentric 1997 (90093).
- <sup>3</sup> From the Grace Thrillers Video, "Make Us One," Producer Ashley Cooper, 1999.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid.

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