# Ain't I a Womanist, Too?

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# Is This a Dance Floor or a Revival Meeting?

## *Theological Questions and Challenges from the Underground House Music Movement*

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I join with womanist voices that articulate a beloved community inclusive of all, exclusive to none. Womanist theology makes a claim for wholeness and inclusivity, transcending differences of gender, class, race, sexuality, and politics. Thus I am interested in expanding womanist notions of love and community not only to give voice to voiceless women as has been its tradition, but also to include men who are marginalized due to heterosexism. Womanists have described a type of community that thrives upon the inclusion of women and men, straight and gay, privileged and disadvantaged existing together in just and healthy ways. I join them in their understanding of the need for a whole community in which all are welcome, and none are marginalized. However, the womanist discourse has fallen short in at least two areas in particular: (1) by not addressing non-Christian African American persons, and (2) which is the focus of this work, an absence of an actual, practiced inclusion of homosexual people and their legitimate roles within African American community and spiritual life.

Understanding the context of the emergence of womanist theology as distinct from black theology and white feminism, I know that these African American women have demanded and created theological and communal spaces for our voices, but also with an intention for all members of the community who have been marginalized. As Linda E. Thomas writes, "womanist theology demands a God talk and God walk which is holistic,

seeking to address the survival and liberation issues of women, men, children, workers, gays and lesbians, as these relate to local and global economies and the environment."[1] It is from this intention that I join with the voices of the third wave as I push the womanist envelope to live up to its promises of inclusivity and justice.

I have to admit that I come to writing this essay out of somewhat selfish desires. In the first place, I am an African American female religion scholar whose own spirituality lands me outside the realm of mainstream Christianity. My scholarship has largely been in the areas of New Thought and metaphysical religions, leaving many theology scholars wondering how or where to situate my work. My first book, *Beyond Christianity: African Americans in a New Thought Church*, is an ethnographic study of an Oakland, California church of African American New Thought believers. The second volume to which I have contributed as co-editor is *Women and New and Africana Religions*, a work intentional about presenting the religious diversity among women, including African Diaspora women, and the ways in which their spiritualities are expressed in their lives throughout the world. Thus I have an interest in religious diversity joining the conversation of womanist theology so that African Americans like me are not rendered theologically invisible.

In the second place, I write this essay out of another personal interest, and that is music. I am an avid fan of underground dance music known as house music. I will say more descriptively about the genre of house music shortly. However, suffice it to say for now that it is my love of house music that has led me to observe and intimately come to know the subgenre of gospel house music and the many facets of its emergence and continuing manifestation. I have come to learn, see, hear, and feel gospel house music as a socially and theologically critical form of protest music. I have come to know it as a life-affirming, humanizing art that functions as a form of religious identity construction and meaning system for gay black men as they seek to reclaim and reshape their religious beliefs in an alternative space that permits them freedom to be wholly themselves and still unequivocally loved by God. Many of these gay black men are also Christian, and they believe on Jesus Christ as lord, but the Christian church has shunned them, has dehumanized and marginalized them. Feeling the sting of excommunication, these men have not given up on their faith, but have creatively and intentionally relocated the worship space to the dance floor of the nightclub where they feel free to sing, dance, and worship in their own sanctuary with new and rearranged hymns of liberation and inclusiveness.

This is a phenomenon from which I have learned for nearly twenty years. I have danced and Sunday-shouted right along to house music anthems that are now considered classics of the genre. Thus this essay is a participant-observation, a labor of love testament to those black gay men who have carved out an alternative religious space when the Christian church folk they know have turned their backs on them, and label them sinful and ungodly.

Thus I propose to examine the complexities of the underground dance music movement known as house music in an effort to lift up the theological reflections, challenges, and commentaries found specifically within gospel house music, a subgenre of the larger house movement. This paper will describe a brief history of house music, contextualizing it within its own sets of norms and club culture, and attempt to represent the gospel house experience as a performed spiritual expression of a marginalized segment of the population. I will offer a social and theological critique of marginalized black gay men through an examination of selected lyrics, the dance floor environment, and the role of the DJ as important components that create a club atmosphere conducive to free personal expression and worship.

## Not Everyone Understands House Music

House music is an underground form of dance music made popular in the nightclubs of Chicago and New York City in the waning days of the disco era of the late 1970s and early 1980s. While disco imploded and attracted mass media scorn and ridicule, the impulse to dance and the accompanying music played in nightclubs continued to evolve, eventually taking on the more generic title of "dance" music to distinguish it from disco and the negative baggage associated with it. This dance music combined disco, funk, and rhythm and blues music, and took on a specific blend under the skill and style of each particular DJ who played it. Musically, it is described as rhythm-driven music created with electronic synthesizers and drum machines. It is music intended to be "felt" within the body, not just heard. Indeed, house music is often referred to by fans, DJs, and producers as being "a body thing, a soul thing, a spiritual thing."[2]

House music is enormously diverse and has developed many subgenres, such as deep house, soulful or vocal house, trance, electronica, euro, acid, techno, tribal, and (the subject of this paper) gospel house music, just to name a few within this narrow but deep well. These terms may also be substituted by reference to geographic region such as Chicago, New York, Detroit, Jersey, or euro-style "house" as these locations have become associated with particular styles that regular club-goers understand. Notably absent are West Coast cities.

While San Francisco has earned some recognition in the genre, it is comparatively minimal, and the rest of California barely registers at all on the scene.[3] The term "house" is a reference to one of the most famous dance clubs in 1980s Chicago, the Wherehouse, where this music was created and played by DJs on turntables into the late-night and early-morning hours. A similar following was happening in New York City at the legendary but now defunct club called the Paradise Garage. "House" became a type of shorthand for the style of music that came from the Wherehouse, even as it has spread and evolved around the world. Typically, much of the clientele of these clubs were and continue to be black and Latino gay men who had been part of the disco era, but found a new form of expression with house music. Thus much of the aesthetic of this music reflects a mix of African American and/or Latino culture and music, and a recognized gay sensibility espousing freedom of expression, pride, and self-reliance.

This is music that has emerged from, and is still largely maintained by, marginalized people and their cultures. As a result, it continues to exist as a largely underground phenomenon, in contrast to "mainstream," that which is widely recognized and accepted. Underground dance music refers to music, a lifestyle, a culture, and an aesthetic that is little known by the masses, functioning successfully below the radar of media attention, and therefore not played on radio or sold in common music outlets. House music enthusiasts must intentionally seek out the music, the clubs, and community networks in order to stay abreast of relevant news and information. What is known or at least supposed by the larger society tends to be stereotypical generalizations that house is "gay music" or for drug users tripping out on ecstasy.

House culture provides an alternative space and field of expression within which one finds a number of spiritual references, one of which is gospel house songs. House music clubs represent safe spaces where gay men and those straight folks sympathetic to them could find a place to be themselves in an affirming community and dance to the music they loved. Out of this context arose the sub-subgenre of gospel house music. In this form, DJs and producers create remixes of established gospel songs or create new songs with a gospel musicality, but with lyrics that actually replace some of the sin-oriented language with words of God's unconditional love and acceptance of everyone. Like the blues, some of these songs are written to critique the so-called "good Christian," who is found to be hypocritical, overly judgmental, and exclusive in their own personal behavior. Gospel house music has become a refuge for those gay men who still value their Christian faith, and the clubs allow them to create their own family connections and worship spaces. The music allows them to

maintain their connection to God, but bypass the tension caused by oppressive teachings that generally ostracize and marginalize them.

## Lyrics and Theological Reflections

Let us now consider the lyrics of some gospel house songs and the theological reflections or critiques therein. The critical lyrics speak of the hypocrisy of so-called "good Christians" who are judgmental and exclusive in their faith expressions. As a counter to anti-gay Christian messages, gospel house lyrics emphasize a view of God as all-loving, accepting, and inclusive. These lyrics subvert the dominant Christian hermeneutical paradigm that God hates gay people or hates homosexuality, with self-affirming and God-affirming messages to the contrary. These messages are carried out musically as a combination of a heavy bass line and 4/4 dance tempo, soulful vocals, and lyrics that both praise God and deliver a social critique.

One of these songs, "You Don't Even Know Me," describes the singer's feelings of being harshly criticized but not actually known for the type of person he is. While it is not explicitly stated that the lyrics represent a statement about sexuality, I have witnessed that the song has been enthusiastically appropriated by gay audiences as representing their own situation in relation to homophobic communities. The lyrics are as follows, "You don't even know me. You say that I'm not living right / You don't understand me so why do you judge my life? / Who are you to say that I'm living wrong / always telling me what do? / It's my life, it's my life, and I'm living it now," followed by a soaring falsetto male voice widely imitated by the club-goers on the dance floor.[4]

Other songs are straightforward praise songs directed to God the father and/or Jesus as redeemer of all humanity, but without going through the Christian church as mediator. Some of these titles include "We Lift Our Hands in the Sanctuary," where the sanctuary is actually the club where the "worship" is happening on the dance floor. This song is not to be confused with the traditional gospel song of the same name by Kurt Carr. This song is a gospel house praise song where it has become an anthem sung from the dance floor. The lyrics state, "No pressure, no fear, nobody's in your business, nobody really cares . . . we rejoice, we lift our hands, love is alive in the sanctuary, I feel alive in the sanctuary, everybody dance in the sanctuary, people come to dance at the sanctuary, we clap our hands in the sanctuary, so hear our voice in the sanctuary, we rejoice in the sanctuary."[5]

We can also refer to a song titled "He Reigns," in which God is recognized and praised as a loving, omnipotent creator of all. As with many house songs, there are sometimes minimal lyrics, even a short phrase looped over and over.

This is such a song, wherein the phrase, "We pray to you because you deliver us, he reigns from heaven above, he reigns. He's an awesome God, he's glorious. He reigns we praise you. He reigns, he reigns, he reigns, forever and ever," which is looped repeatedly over a bass-heavy, rhythmic dance beat.[6] Again, because many gay men have lost their family connections and church affiliations due to their sexuality, the dance clubs have become spaces for reclaiming fragments of their traditional faith in alternative ways, ways that celebrate their humanity. A song like this one reveals a traditional vision of God as all-powerful deity, or one may say it is expressive of a neo-kingdom theology in which God rules as sole monarch over his kingdom. While it may seem surprising to encounter this type of traditionalism, it reinforces the concept for these men that it is God who is supreme, and God who will do the judging, not one human being over another. The critique remains against the one who takes on God's role as judge, and then marginalizes and oppresses others. This type of song actually functions for gay men in this context to solidify their devotion to God directly, despite the Christian church's effort to circumvent it. Gay men who celebrate with this song are subversively affirming their right to relationship with God despite what others might have to say about it.

## God Is a DJ[7]

To add to the complexities of understanding house music, I add that many varieties of the music and culture embody a generalized spirituality, a type of metanarrative of spirituality that gets disseminated through the description or names of clubs, specific parties, song titles, and a cultural aesthetic that is often determined by the DJ. The cultural aesthetic to which I refer is one that recognizes the music as generating a spiritual experience, and house enthusiasts often use the phrase "house is a spiritual thing" to describe the music whether in ordinary conversation with one another, or printed T-shirt graphics, posters, or included in song lyrics, there is a general understanding of the transcendent or spiritual feeling that house music stimulates. One song, called "House Music," states the following: "Not everyone understands house music; it's a spiritual thing, a body thing, a soul thing."[8] Another example comes from the song, "Spiritual Groove," which states, "This is the sound of a spiritual groove. When I hear this sound, I feel like dancing."[9] Other songs include "House of God,"[10] which is a clever critique of a minister's requests for money looped throughout the song; "God Is a DJ"; and yes, even "Inspirations from a Small Black Church on the Eastside of Detroit,"[11] where as one might imagine the already-fuzzy line between sacred and profane is further blurred with sounds of a church piano and a foot-stomping dance beat merged into the perfect juke

joint song. Other areas in which we see this is in the names of clubs such as the Sanctuary and the Buddha Lounge. We also see the blurring of the sacred and profane in themed parties such as "Sunday Mass," a house music party taking place over the past year and a half at a well-known San Francisco club called The EndUp.

Likewise, some DJs have made their respective spiritualities a part of the atmosphere they create, complete with burning incense and a raised DJ booth reminiscent of a raised pulpit. Some, like Osunlade and Joe "Joaquin" Claussell, have come to be associated with syncretic African traditional religions. The DJ Bodhi Sattva mixes Asian and African elements to his eclectic sessions. The musical styles of Osunlade, Claussell, and Bodhi Sattva are representative of Latin, or tribal house subgenres in that they bring in an ethereal element complemented by African drumming or forest sounds of monkey and bird calls. Other DJs, while not embodying a particular spirituality themselves, create a spiritual atmosphere, by shifting the party into an intentional time of worship. Club-goers often refer to this as "the DJ took us to church." Internationally renowned house DJ Frankie Knuckles (aka Godfather of House) refers to "the disco as a church for the children fallen from grace." Music scholar Kai Fikentscher, in his book "You Better Work!," makes many connections between the rituals of the black church and the ritualism displayed on the dance floor of the club. He draws a parallel between the sacred and secular roles of DJ and preacher, both engaged in call-and-response that drives the crowd to an emotional and physical frenzy imbued with a larger meaning about who they are.

Moreover, Fikentscher quotes a club-goer from the days of the legendary Paradise Garage nightclub in New York, under the direction of iconic DJ Larry Levan. Consider the following comment:

> On Sunday mornings around 7:00am, Larry would stop all the dancing by putting on Aretha Franklin singing "Mary Don't You Weep." We knew he was giving us church. But then he would take us from [a black] church to his church! After Aretha [Franklin] was done with her song, he would serve us fiercely! And he didn't do this just once, but for several weeks.[12]

Thus the role of the DJ is critical for how the music is delivered and how or whether the space is successfully transformed into a safe, spiritual sanctuary. It is not unusual for African American house DJs to close their Saturday night

into Sunday morning sets with gospel music as "the children" are sent out into a new day.

All of these cultural components reflect the general, syncretic spiritual metanarrative, and function as cues and reinforcement helping the underground house club-goer navigate the genres and subgenres of the music. If these signals are misread, a club-goer could end up at the wrong type of party. By this, I refer again to the many types of house music in the underground scene. If one did not understand the specific language code of what anthropologist Clifford Geertz might call a cultural native, he or she could end up at a party of another type of house such as electronic or trance, which are aesthetically and culturally very different from deep or gospel house.[13] As one who has made this mistake, it can be quite unsettling and disappointing. Since this is an underground movement, information is generally passed within the community through in-group language codes. Even with the extensive network now available on the Internet, getting to the desired house community remains a challenge for the outsider or casual fan. YouTube represents a public forum where one is able to observe comments and responses between the true "househead" and the so-called "wanna-be," who is perpetrating or faking it as a DJ or commentator in their video postings. This is made evident by the person's misuse of genres, lack of pertinent historical knowledge, or just poor DJ skills. The critiques in this case can be excoriating, drawing a distinction between the purist and the neophyte or dilettante. What emerges as important currency in perhaps any underground movement, but certainly here, is correct knowledge, language, and skills.

## The Underground and the Hush Harbor (or Hush Harbor as Underground)

Finally, I would like to offer a parallel for our consideration, between the underground house music club scene as alternative, safe space where spirituality is reconstructed by the marginalized people it serves, and the hush harbor practices of enslaved African Americans confined to plantation life and subjected to oppressive Christian messages. Scholars such as Albert Raboteau, C. Eric Lincoln, Lawrence Mamiya, and Deborah Gray White have given us historical accounts of American slave life.[14] In Raboteau's classic text, *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South*, he vividly describes the secret religious practices of enslaved African Americans. He poses this alternative religion as a creative and life-affirming response to the slave-making and slave-keeping form of Christianity imposed upon them. As oppressed

people living under constant threat and terror, enslaved populations of African-descended people understood the concept of a God who liberates, hermeneutically reenvisioning Christianity, infusing it with the remnants of Africa, and creating a hidden-in-plain-sight worship space where they were free to be themselves, loved and cared for by God. This worship always involved music and dance. For the African person, even in diaspora, to dance is to invite in the gods. Historical accounts describe for us the dancing and the singing, and the appropriation of the Christian message embodied in dance and the protest music we now call Negro spirituals. Again, we have a musical language that could be made public, but coded in such a way that only the insiders grasped the true meaning. These early spirituals are known to offer social critique, often veiled, but nonetheless proclaiming their own humanity despite all societal messages to the contrary. We find lyrics that reinforce that God is indeed on their side. While this may have seemed entirely absurd to the larger society, the enslaved African Americans knew differently, holding onto this knowledge as truth that would eventually be manifest.[15]

Moreover, accounts of slave religion, and later works on the black church and black Christ, reveal an intimate relationship between African Americans and Jesus. He was and still is often understood as co-sufferer, friend, comforter, and savior—not only in the afterlife, but as divine liberator from present-day suffering. Thus African American Christians have constructed a very specific relationship with Jesus throughout the struggle for dignity and civil rights. Indeed, in *A Black Theology of Liberation*, James Cone emphasizes that in terms of the historical Jesus, a marginalized minority is a more meaningful example than even the kerygmatic Jesus in the struggle for black civil rights. The kerygmatic is important, he says, for the ultimate salvation of humanity, but a practical application of theology to the specific conditions of black Americans requires an appreciation and emphasis upon the historical Jesus, a despised and marginalized minority person.[16]

Thus I draw a parallel between the special role of Jesus for African Americans in slavery and the civil rights struggle, hidden hush harbor religious worship, and the contemporary underground house music club scene. Here, marginalized gay black and Latino men have reconstructed an alternative spiritual space where they understand God to be for them, despite what the dominant society and the Christian paradigm assert against them. Underground, then as now, takes on a dimension of safety, freedom of expression, and radical inclusivity. Gospel house emerges as a new canon of freedom songs sung as they always are from the mouths of the oppressed, who nevertheless proclaim their humanity and right to be. The Christological point

is illustrated by the house song "He Is," in which the claims of the Negro spirituals are heard once again in lyrics that report, "[Jesus] is my friend, my brother, oh yes he is."[17] As ethnomusicologist and Sweet Honey in the Rock founder Bernice Johnson Reagon has said, every generation must create their own freedom songs.[18] I assert that gospel house music represents a branch of that tradition.

## Conclusion

If we are to take seriously the womanists' challenge toward inclusive, healthy, and just communities, then the challenge stands to include all people regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation. The founding womanists such as Katie Cannon, Delores Williams, Jacquelyn Grant, et al., have opened a way for such inclusion to happen not only in the work they have done for black women, but in their vision for what can be done for people marginalized by heterosexism. If we are free to adjust our hermeneutical lenses of Scripture and church doctrine to overcome racism, sexism, and economic exploitation, then surely we are able to do so to liberate people from oppressive beliefs and systems around sexuality. If we understand that God's request that we "love one another" is the highest of teachings, then we already have a methodology to accomplish such a goal.

# Notes

1. Linda E. Thomas, "Womanist Theology, Epistemology, and a New Anthropological Paradigm," *CrossCurrents*, 48, no. 4 (Winter 1998–99): 493.

2. Eddie Amador, "House Music," released March 1999, on *International Club Union Session*, Vol. 2; compact disc.

3. A notable exception is the Deep House Music scene founded by Los Angeles DJ Marques Wyatt, who has been an active and prominent DJ for at least twenty years, and founder of the weekly party Deep: Where House Lives. As well as L.A. DJ Tony Powell who is the founder of Dirty Dirty House Club (DDHC).

4. Duane Harden, vocal performance of "You Don't Know Me," by Duane Harden, Armand Van Helden, Kossi Gardner, released July 2001, on *Filtered: The Best of Filtered Dance*, Tommy Boy; compact disc.

5. DJ Oji & Una, "We Lift Our Hands in the Sanctuary" (Ron Trent's Shelter Mix), by DJ Oji, released 2002, on *Sancsoul Sessions EP*, Sancsoul Records—SS002 (written for Strong Black Man Music); vinyl, 12", EP, 33 1/3, RPM.

6. Yass, "He Reigns," by Sebastien Grand and Yass, released 2007, on *I'm Free*, Purple Music, mp3.

7. Faithless, "God Is a DJ," by Catto, Maxi Jazz, Rollo, Sister Bliss, released 1998, on *Sunday 8pm*, Arista Records, 1998, compact disc.

8. "House Music."

9. Sound of Soul, "Spiritual Groove (Hard Steppin' Dub)," lyrics by Marcel Scooler; written, produced, and arranged by Mark Zehnder and Christian Kistler, released 2000, on the compilation CD *Lazy Dog: Deep House Music* by Ben Watt and Jay Hannan, Astralwerks, compact disc.

10. Dimensional Holofonic Sound, "House of God," by D.H.S., released 1991, on *House of God*, Hangman Records, vinyl, 12".

11. Dimensional Holofonic Sound, "House of God," by D.H.S., released 1991, on *House of God*, Hangman Records, vinyl, 12".

12. Kai Fikentscher, *"You Better Work!" Underground Dance Music in New York City* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), 105.

13. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books/HarperCollins, 1973), 11.

14. See Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South* (1978; reprint, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya, *The Black Church in African American Experience* (1985; reprint, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990); Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, rev. ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999).

15. Raboteau, 243–66.

16. James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 25 anniv. ed. (1970; reprint, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 110–28.

17. Copyright, "He Is" (Ferrer & Sydenham Inc Vox Mix), by Sam Holt and Gavin "DJ Face" Mills, remix by Jerome Sydenham and Dennis Ferrer, released 2006, on *Copyright feat. Song Williamson—He Is* (Ferrer & Sydenham Inc Vox Mix), Independence Records, vinyl 12".

18. Bernice Johnson Reagon, "The Songs Are Free," documentary by Bill Moyers conducted in 1991, *Bill Moyers Journal*, PBS, November 23, 2007, http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/11232007/profile3.html.