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Lerone A. Martin

***Preaching on Wax: The Phonograph and the
Shaping of Modern African American Religion***

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Reviewer: Denis J. Bekkering (St. Jerome's University, Canada)

During the 1920s, savvy American revivalists pioneered evangelical electronic broadcasting by bringing the old-time religion to radio, the latest in communications technology, thereby paving the way for today's celebrity-driven and heavily commodified media ministries. As Lerone Martin points out in *Preaching on Wax*, African Americans were largely excluded from early religious radio, due in no small part to the prohibitive cost of home radio sets. Phonographs, however, were more accessible and therefore popular within African American communities, encouraging dozens of entrepreneurial black preachers, in collaboration with established record labels hungry for new revenue streams, to

record sermons to shellac discs. Advertised and sold alongside musical “race records,” some of these titles became hits, bringing fame, wealth, and prestige to their performers.

Preaching on Wax examines what Martin refers to as “phonograph religion” from 1925, the year of Reverend Calvin P. Dixon’s inaugural session with Columbia Records, to 1941, when record production fell off because of war-related, government-instituted limits on shellac. His aim is to explain “why a critical mass of African American ministers...teamed up with major phonograph labels to record and sell their sermons and why black consumers eagerly purchased them,” as well as to outline and assess “how this ‘phonograph religion’ significantly contributed to the shaping of modern African American Christianity” (p. 3). According to Martin, the migration of millions of rural African Americans to urban centres between 1900 and 1930 prompted moves by black Protestant clergy to “remake” (p. 5) Christianity for the radically shifting sociocultural landscape. While liberal church leaders often “augmented creeds, dogmas, and practices,” many evangelical preachers “attempted to hold fast to traditional beliefs” (p. 5), while at the same time embracing modern methods of spreading the gospel. By placing “their phonograph sermons on the market shelf” (p. 8), evangelical “phonograph preachers” (p. 61), Martin argues, “significantly changed the face of African American religion and culture during the interwar period by establishing the black religious practices of sermon commodification, broadcasting, commercial celebrity, and the modern nature of religious authority” (p. 8).

Chapter 1 establishes the impact of the phonograph, invented by Thomas Edison in 1877, on American culture. Perceived by many as a modern miracle, the device would become “the primary entertainment medium in American life” (p. 13) by the early twentieth century. A nascent recording industry emerged, pressing millions of musical and spoken word discs, including religious material, for a diverse customer base. The desires and tastes of African American audiences, however, were more or less ignored until 1920, when the rising threat of radio spurred the development of a lucrative race record market. In Chapter 2, Martin examines how “black faith communities” reacted to the popularity of blues and jazz records, which, he argues, “disrupted and challenged not only the church’s entertainment monopoly, but also its cultural hegemony” (p. 33). The “Black Protestant Establishment” (p. 58) considered such recordings vulgar and a “hindrance to racial uplift and Christian faith,” (p. 33), and responded by offering less successful “‘wholesome’ amusements” (p. 50), including its own records, or by focusing on “teaching, instruction, and inspiration,” leaving the development of “‘proper’ amusements” to “black professional men” (p. 55). However, some evangelical preachers would attempt to “sanctify the phonograph and race records for church work”

(p. 61), thus continuing American evangelicalism's tendency to appropriate purportedly "secular" (p. 50) cultural forms.

In the following four chapters, Martin tackles the book's central arguments through case studies of a selection of phonograph preachers. Chapter 3 examines the early efforts of the aforementioned Reverend Dixon, promoted as "Black Billy Sunday" on Columbia record labels, and Reverend William Arthur White, who also recorded in 1925 for the Paramount label. Although the pair would not hit it big, due, Martin argues, to their "formal language" and emphasis on "erudite theological issues" (p. 90), Dixon and White were trailblazers in using "the black popular entertainment industry as a basis of ministry," and their sermons were transformed into "mass-produced spiritual commodities" (pp. 63-64). Much more successful was the Atlanta-based, Baptist preacher Reverend James M. Gates, the main subject of the remainder of the book. Like race record artists, Gates "spoke the dominant language of the rural diaspora in a manner that resonated with black migrants" (p. 59). Chapter 4 opens with a discussion of Gates' 1926 smash for Columbia, "Death's Black Train is Coming," which combined a short, spoken-word introduction with a bluesy group take on the titular song. With this side, Gates paved the way for "popular black religious broadcasting" (p. 92), and he would be followed by others, including Pentecostals and several women, who melded "popular black entertainment" (p. 107) with "folk worship" (p. 100). In Chapter 5, Martin proposes that Gates "initiated the tradition of black clergy gaining authority through the commercial marketplace," during a period when black ministers were rapidly losing status to "a new black professional class" (p. 130). While many ministers would copy the "culture of black professionalism," Gates instead followed the lead of "black commercial celebrities" (pp. 130-131) towards "social authority and upward mobility" (p. 148). In his role as a celebrity phonograph preacher, Gates used his fame to speak against perceived social problems. As Martin argues in Chapter 6, however, Gates' "embeddedness in the commercial world" (p. 160) also constrained his prophetic potential, as evidenced by the Okeh label refusing to release a 1930 recording featuring the preacher railing against chain stores as a destructive force in America, thereby paradoxically decrying a distribution network that was crucial to his own success.

Preaching on Wax's greatest strength is its rich history of the production side of early black phonograph preaching, coloured with fascinating stories of shrewd agents, filthy pressing plants, and enterprising Pullman porters reselling in-demand records during their travels. Drawing on an array of primary sources ranging from print advertisements to interviews, Martin expertly illustrates the collaborations of preachers and record labels to both spread the gospel and bring in profits, deftly

analyses these efforts in relation to broader issues facing African American Protestantism during the period, and convincingly argues that these phonograph preachers were important progenitors to contemporary evangelical superstars such as T.D. Jakes and Juanita Bynum. How everyday individuals used and understood phonograph preaching, however, remains rather obscure because of a paucity of sources. In the sixth chapter, Martin suggests that “(b)uyers engaged in a conversation with the sermons, continually reinterpreting them, sometimes in ways that were at odds with their intended meanings” (p. 156). Yet his general representation of audience members is as relatively uncritical consumers, shopping for products that could meet their spiritual needs, even to the point of replacing in-person religious gatherings. Although Martin acknowledges in Chapter 4 that “urban migrants,” feeling excluded from sedate urban churches, “established house and storefront churches where they could engage in expressive worship,” he goes on to argue that “popular phonograph preachers condensed the common facets of black evangelical worship to fit the limited time parameters of a record and packaged it for easy consumption. Simply put, they re-created the African American evangelical worship experience on wax.” Thus, “churchgoers seeking a revival experience no longer had to risk being ostracized, nor did they have to travel and brave the elements and crowds” (pp. 93–4); instead, they could enjoy a “revival on wax” (p. 5) in the comfort of their own homes. While these arguments help support Martin’s conception of “phonograph religion” as a distinct religious sphere, research on both televangelism and Christianity and the Internet has seriously questioned the ability of electronically mediated religious products and activities to function as adequate substitutes for face-to-face worship. Rather, individuals have generally incorporated these practices and products, selectively and critically, into their lives as supplements to their existing religious activities – complicated processes that cannot be accounted for by the consumption metaphor.

Martin’s market approach also leads to other issues, particularly in regards to the relationships between musical race records and black faith communities. His abovementioned assertion that the church held an “entertainment monopoly” (p. 33) before the arrival of race records, which sets the stage for his discussion of competition and overlaps between the purveyors of “sacred” and “secular” recordings (p. 89), is too strong. This idea contributes to a picture of race records as a revolutionary “phenomenon” that arose somewhat *ex nihilo* to threaten the church, and to exert a profound influence on, among other things, “(b)lack nightlife” (p. 41). However, race records were also *reflections* of such pre-existing entertainment options which, as Martin notes in Chapter 2, already troubled many of the faithful and provoked responses from concerned ministry leaders. In discussing the failure of

“uplift-style entertainments of the church” to “compete” with the “black entertainment industry,” Martin also argues that many individuals were unwilling to “pass up” a “new race record, concert, cabaret, or style show . . . in exchange for a church concert or dance” (p. 53). This either/or language overlooks the possibility of individuals engaging in both forms of entertainment. Similarly, the book’s overall contrasting of musical race records with the offerings of popular phonograph preachers – one genre purchased to “meet . . . mundane needs and desires,” the other for “sacred” satiation (p. 83) – may misrepresent the blending of these discs, which were advertised (p. 132) and sold (p. 83) together, in the lives of everyday individuals. Martin does recognize the entertaining potential of rollicking sides like those cut by Reverend F.W. McGee, backed by “‘secular’ musicians,” which “echoed the fold expressions of blues singers” (p. 113). Yet he does not explore the possibility of purportedly “secular” artists also speaking to the spiritual side of listeners’ lives, as with blues legend Bessie Smith’s “The Devil’s Gonna Git You” (1928), “Moan, You Mourners” (1930), and “On Revival Day” (1930).

Despite these issues, *Preaching on Wax* is an important contribution to the study of religion, media, and culture in America, which sheds considerable light on a woefully neglected form of mass-media ministry.