THE WHITFIELD SOUND

UNEARTHING FOUNDATIONAL ELEMENTS OF CONTEMPORARY GOSPEL MUSIC

BRANDON CHRISTIAN WADDLES

Brandon Christian Waddles
Lecturer of Choral Conducting
& Music Education
Wayne State University/Detroit, MI
bwaddles@wayne.edu

Toward the latter half of the twentieth century there was a focal shift in the gospel music scene. The city of Detroit, a major transportation hub during the Great Migration along with Chicago, the birthplace of Black gospel music, produced a new crop of gospel musicians with fresh ideas. Rev. Charles Craig, Rev. James Cleveland, Rev. Charles Nicks, and Dr. Mattie Moss Clark were chief among those who helped to create the sophisticated sound of gospel music that Detroit became known for, compared to the more visceral utterings of Chicago's home-grown traditional style.

Thomas Whitfield (1954-1992), a Detroit native, was born and reared during the height of this new era of classic gospel music. What he heard and experienced inside and outside of the church inspired him to foster a style of gospel music that would permeate the scene and redefine the genre in myriad ways, including harmony, compositional structure, and textual significance. The sound Whitfield forged in the last two decades of his life is the predominant aural aesthetic of contemporary gospel music.

The defining features of the Whitfield Sound are as follows: 1) the redefining of the choral sound in gospel music; 2) the blending of gospel, jazz, and classicism; 3) the creation of orchestral textures in gospel music; and 4) the deepening of intimacy in gospel song lyrics. From a musical standpoint, sophistication and elegance lies at the foundation of Whitfield's writing. From a spiritual standpoint, the message within his music was unadulterated in its intent and presentation. The Whitfield Sound is the sonic bridge between the gospel music of past and present.

Redefining the Choral Sound

Donald Lawrence, when asked how he would define the Whitfield Sound, described the style in terms of a kind of "Gothic Catholicism." He wrote that it exuded an "almost medieval choir overtone."[1] Lawrence's inclusion of the choral aspect within the style exemplifies how integral Whitfield's flagship ensemble, his Company, was to the development of the Whitfield Sound. Whitfield trained the choir to access the detail and precision of smaller ensembles, allowing the group to attain more complex harmonies in their singing than had previously been achieved in gospel music. Even so, the Company—nearly fifty strong—never lost the warm strength of sound. Dr. Tony McNeill said this about the Whitfield Company Sound:

> It is a versatile, rich, full-bodied, balanced choral tone that is motivated by a unique, bold confidence and dexterity normally found in a solo voice but mastered by an ensemble. The Whitfield Company is probably one of the most musically malleable gospel choirs ever.[2]

McNeill's sentiments echo the strivings of a number of gospel ensembles that formed in the '80s and '90s, influenced by the Whitfield Company. These include Lawrence's Tri-City Singers, Kurt Carr & the Kurt Carr Singers, Kirk Franklin & Family, and James Hall & Worship & Praise. Thomas Whitfield and his Company created the sound to be emulated among choral ensembles in contemporary gospel music.

Since its inception, the Whitfield Company has boasted some of the most accomplished musical talents Detroit had to offer. Donna Harris stated that Whitfield found the moniker "Company" to be imperative because it invited the "varied and diverse gifts" of the members into a "collaborative" and "inclusive" space.[3] Due to the heightened musical acumen of the singers, Whitfield was able to imbue his creative vision in ways that were previously inaccessible to him. The Company, therefore, was the foremost aural emblem of the Whitfield Sound.

One of the major draws of the Company was its ability to sing what Lawrence refers to as "unavailable tension."[4] This Lawrence defined as Whitfield voicing the choir on a basic triad over extended harmonies in the accompanying instrumentation. One example of this tension occurs in Whitfield's original composition "With My Whole Heart." The choir sings a root position F major triad over an extended

A7 chord (Figure 1). Whitfield found it crucial that each singer had an independent ear to hear extended chordal structures.

Another aspect of the Company's innovative sound was its extension of what Andrew Legg referred to as foundational gospel singing techniques.[5] The choir showcased an innate ability to sing highly dramatized yet equally balanced and tempered vocal "acrobatics," such as swells and slides. In an example in "With My Whole Heart," the crescendo marks represent vocal "swells," which are often denoted by a widening of the vowel along with a heightening of volume (Figure 2).

The Company also normalized and made popular the use of the vocal slide in gospel music. Lawrence notes that this was rarely, if ever, performed in gospel music before then. Such vocal techniques are more common in musical theatre performances among soloists and smaller cast ensembles. Listening to the vocal slides in "Noth-

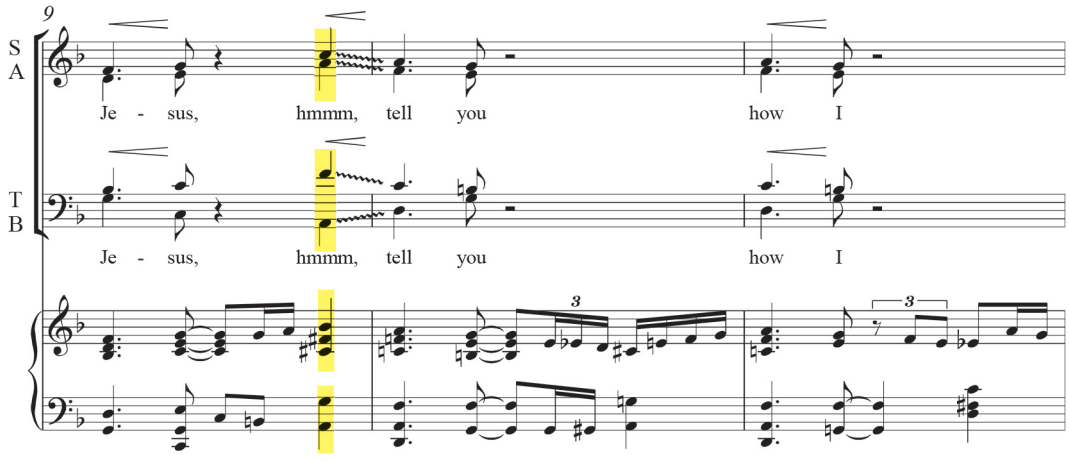

Figure 1. Thomas Whitfield, *With My Whole Heart,* mm. 9–11.
"Unavailable tension" denoted in yellow

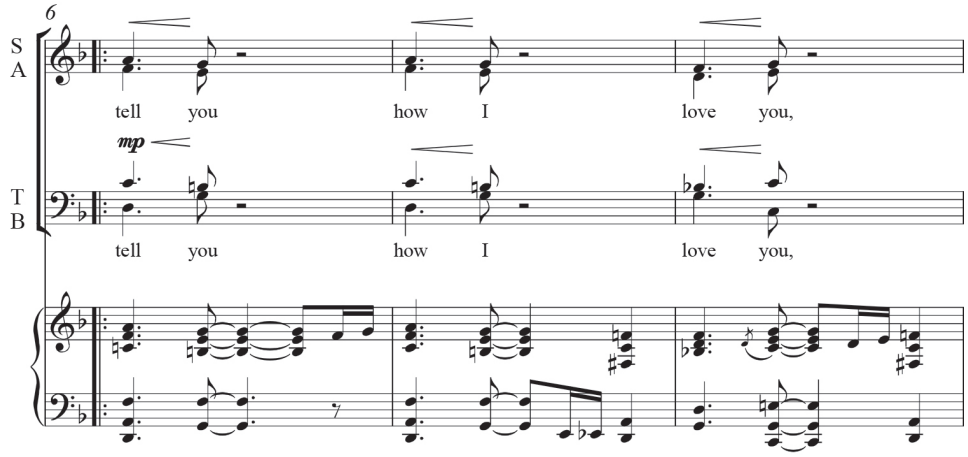

Figure 2. Thomas Whitfield, *With My Whole Heart,* mm. 6–8.
Vocal swells represented by crescendo marks

ing but the Blood" on the Alive and Satisfied project, for instance, one can hear how the Company sings them in three-part harmony with calculated precision. This level of accuracy and cohesiveness, especially for choirs of that size, established a new standard for large ensemble singing in gospel music.

The "varied and diverse gifts" of the Company were perhaps most vividly represented in its cast of soloists. Theirs are the voices that brought to life Whitfield's ardent desires for his music and ministry. Each of these singer's voices was unique. Larry Edwards's voice, for instance, almost baritonal in its warmth, was a vibrant tenor with an extensive upper range; this contrasted with the more youthful and lilting tenor timbre of Ron Kelly. For years Edwards and Kelly not only stood as the lead male vocalists of the Company but, along with other staunch tenor soloists like Michael Fletcher and Scott Bard-Mansur, embodied the heroic sound of the Company's tenor section.

Soprano soloists were just as varied in vocal timbre. Sandra Hudson's tone was as luxurious as it was soulful in her soprano register. Gwen Morton's solo work exuded the balance of Pentecostal grit with the sweeter and more controlled elements of her voice. Denise Morton brought an almost anthemic nature to her gospel style. Her high-seated soprano voice was a flexible, multi-octave display of gospel riffs and classical melismas that displayed her ability to blend the classical and gospel influences in her singing.

The alto soloists were also diverse. Wendy Davis's distinctive tone, combining her warm middle range and reedy exterior timbre, made for a powerhouse sound that exemplified the Pentecostal drive of Whitfield's shout songs. The voice of JoAnn Hill Brown was the definition of Baptist fervor. Even with the sometimes almost reckless abandon of her traditional gospel vocalism in the upper range, the smooth husk of Brown's middle and lower registers made her a perfect fit for the contemporized hymn arrangements Whitfield set with her voice in mind.

Lydia Wright's singing influenced a legion of choir soloists to follow. Wright's improvisational styling contained both a religious fire and a jazzy bounce. "I love [to hear] women that make me want to scream and snatch my wig off," said Lillian Lloyd, noted soloist with Ricky Dillard & New Generation.[6] Lydia found Whitfield's new approach to gospel music to be a perfect fit for her less-than-traditional singing style.[7] She also appreciated the creative freedom that he fostered among his soloists. "As much as we regarded him and respected the value he brought and the quality of his musicianship, he felt the same way about us."

Whitfield's penchant for blend was unwavering. While each of the soloists' voices and singing styles could not be any more different than the other, their individual voices could not be detected when singing in the Company. Many of the Company members stated he achieved this, in part, through vowel unification. Lydia Wright noted that the Company's sound was birthed out of ensuring proper enunciation of vowel sounds. "It was like a whole new alphabet that he taught us," Scott Bard-Mansur recalled.[8] As with more classically trained choral ensembles, Whitfield often had the Company warm up with various vocalises to further instill these techniques.

Lawrence, who attributed his concept of the Tri-City Singers to an urban contemporary version of the Whitfield Company, described the recipe for the sound of the choir:

> One of the recipes of Tommy's choir was a lot of altos and tenors, and a little less on soprano. But the sopranos cut through. And it gave you that weight. So if you really notice, Tri-City has heavy alto. We have more tenors than anything. We have 16 tenors, about 12 altos, and sometimes about 10 sopranos. And again, that particular recipe gave me the weight that I love at the bottom of the choir, still making sure that the sopranos cut through. I really paid attention to how [Whitfield] constructed [the Company] and that was a model for me.

Extending from their vocal technique, one of the predominant factors that set the Company apart was its ability to maintain beauty of tone in the higher tessitura. Whitfield often voiced the choral parts in ranges that were largely inaccessible to most non-professional choirs. "We as altos often sang soprano," JoAnn Hill-Brown remembered. "So where did that put sopranos? I don't know." Even so, Whitfield demanded a great deal

of technical prowess from his singers. Lawrence recalled some of the Company sopranos telling him that Whitfield admonished them that while the notes may be high, it had better not look like they were singing high.

Also among the intriguing aspects of the Whitfield Company sound was how deeply connected the singing was to Thomas's playing. Donna Harris noted that while many musical organizations utilize the choir director as the creative lead, the Whitfield Company "wasn't set up that way." She continued that because Whitfield was the creator, he used the musical instrument at which he played—most often the organ—to create "that inspiration, and later, [creative] control."

Tyrone Block, longtime director of the famed Milton Brunson's Thompson Community Singers, referred to the sound of the Whitfield Company as "timeless" and also observed, "They were doing something different."[9] The elegance of the Company's vocalism, rooted in the sophisticated style of Detroit gospel, and the expressive diversity of its singers was bolstered by Whitfield's technical determination and his contemporizing of gospel harmony. It was within the organic, collaborative context of the Whitfield Company that Thomas Whitfield redefined the choral style and sound of gospel music.

Blending Gospel, Jazz, and Classicism

As a student of famed Detroit musicians Alfred Bolden, Herbert Pickard, and Frank White, Whitfield developed a style of gospel piano and organ playing imbued with classical and jazz influences that translated into the distinctive style of the Whitfield Sound. Richard Smallwood, the formally trained pianist and composer noted for fusing classical idioms into his gospel style, stated that, first and foremost, Whitfield was "an incredible pianist. He was one of the most amazing pianists around."[10] Donald Lawrence exclaimed that when he first began studying Whitfield's music, he thought he was listening to someone play "with six or seven hands … I think that he kind of channeled Oscar Peterson at the piano."

Peterson, one of jazz music's most celebrated pianists, serves as a fitting influence on Whitfield's unparalleled use of extended harmonies in gospel music. Lawrence stated that while contemporaries like Andraé Crouch, Edwin and Walter Hawkins all benefited from jazz influences, Whitfield's stream of jazz extension in gospel was on another level. "He definitely was the forerunner for how I think most keyboard players play today," said Lawrence. "I would say ninety-five to ninety-nine percent of them."

For the sheer volume of musical innovations he brought to gospel music, Whitfield accumulated a repertory of terms accredited to him that exemplified the Whitfield Sound. Chords with major jazz extensions became known as Whitfield chords. Whitfield turns detailed certain passing chord progressions that he regularly utilized in his compositions and arrangements. Even in terms of his songwriting—particularly found in his hymn settings—Whitfield revolutionized song structure with intros, tags, and vamps that progressed storyline in his writing. In essence, the Whitfield Sound redefined how composers and instrumentalists alike approached writing and playing gospel music.

While his original compositional output is significant, Whitfield's arrangements of hymns perhaps best exemplify the totality of his creative imagination. His melodic, harmonic, and textual restructuring of these traditional hymns represent the presence of both classical and jazz influences in gospel music.

Almost all of Whitfield's hymn arrangements follow a relatively specific structure, particularly those that are solo-led. He expanded the traditional verse/chorus structure to include a stylized instrumental introit, a soloist-intoned verse, and a call-and-response-style duet between soloist and chorus, which is concluded by a quasi-improvisational vamp. "Down at the Cross," for example, is based on the Isaac Watts/Ralph Hudson hymn "Alas, and Did My Savior Bleed" (Figure 3 on page 13).

The first audible hallmark of Whitfield's hymn arrangements is the use of deliberately stylized introits. While most gospel music recordings before this time began by simply stating a later portion of the song, or even just rolling a chord, Whitfield regularly composed intros that more aptly set the framework for the piece. In his setting of "Down at the Cross" we hear the intoning of a portion of the traditional hymn melody placed over his trademark jazz extensions (Figure 4 on page 13).

The second part of the song entails the lining of the verse melody. The soloist is isolated with instrumental

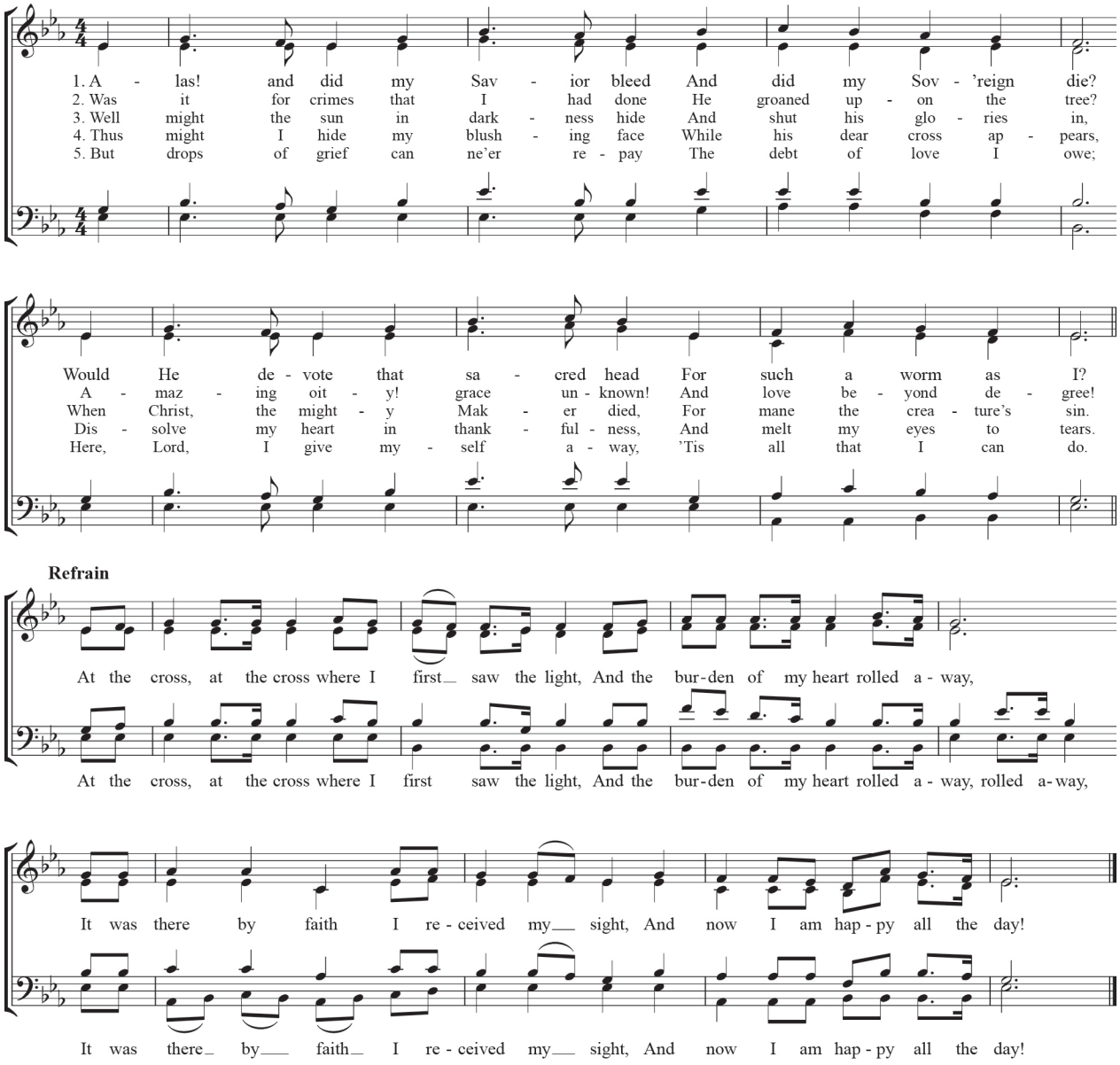

Figure 3. Traditional Hymn, *Alas! And Did My Savior Bleed.*
(commonly referred to as "At the Cross")

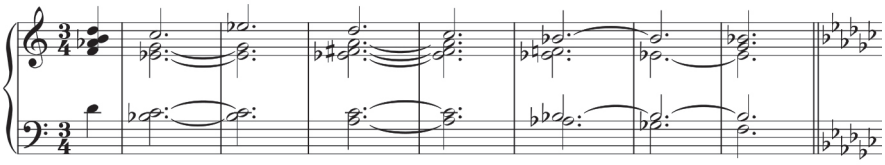

Figure 4. Thomas Whitfield, *Down at the Cross,* Introit, mm. 1–8.

accompaniment. The singer is careful to maintain the integrity of the hymn tune, albeit with slight improvisation. Whitfield reimagines the traditional chord structure, however, with a variety of extended harmonies (Figure 5).

What occurs after the lining of the verse is pivotal to the song structure, as in this moment Whitfield transitions from arranger to composer. Where the traditional hymn chorus would usually follow, the choir inhabits the role of a Shakespearean chorus of sorts, providing musical commentary to what was previously stated by the soloist. Referring back to the hymn refrain in Figure 3, it is clear that Whitfield veers away from the traditional chorus in favor of new melodic, harmonic, and textual material (Figure 6 on page 15).

The following section constitutes what is generally referred to as a Whitfield vamp. The extended ostinato form explores varied harmonic material that is characteristic of Whitfield's writing. Several telling markers include the use of non-chord tones and stacked chords (Figure 7 on page 16).

Whitfield also popularized the use of passing chord sequences in gospel music. Perhaps the most significant occasion is found in the vamp of "Only a Look." Herein he includes a brief instrumental interlude detailing a classically infused secondary-dominant passing chord sequence that descends into a repetition of the choral vamp. This sequence is often referred to as the definitive Whitfield turn (Figure 8 on page 16).

In his dissertation, Dr. Raymond Wise categorized the major periods of gospel music from 1900 to 2000. He placed Thomas Whitfield at the helm of a list of pioneering composers and artists that comprised what Wise referred to as the Word/Ministry era of the 1980s and 1990s. Wise wrote that this era included "extended dominant chords (in all chords through a progression)."[11] This progression, most often in Whitfield's case, was "used in voicing chords that travel around a circle of fourths and fifths." Whitfield frequently used circular progressions in his writing. One prominent example is found in the refrain of another of his hymn arrangements, "Oh, How I Love Jesus" (Figure 9 on page 17).

Another trademark of Whitfield's writing is found in the ending of "Down at the Cross" (Figure 10 on page 17).

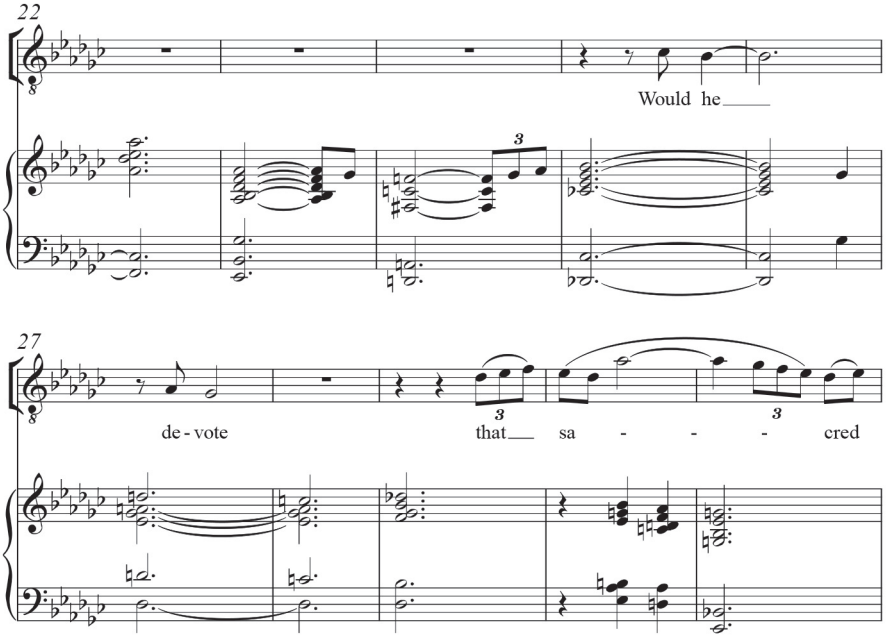

Figure 5. Thomas Whitfield, *Down at the Cross,* mm. 22–31.

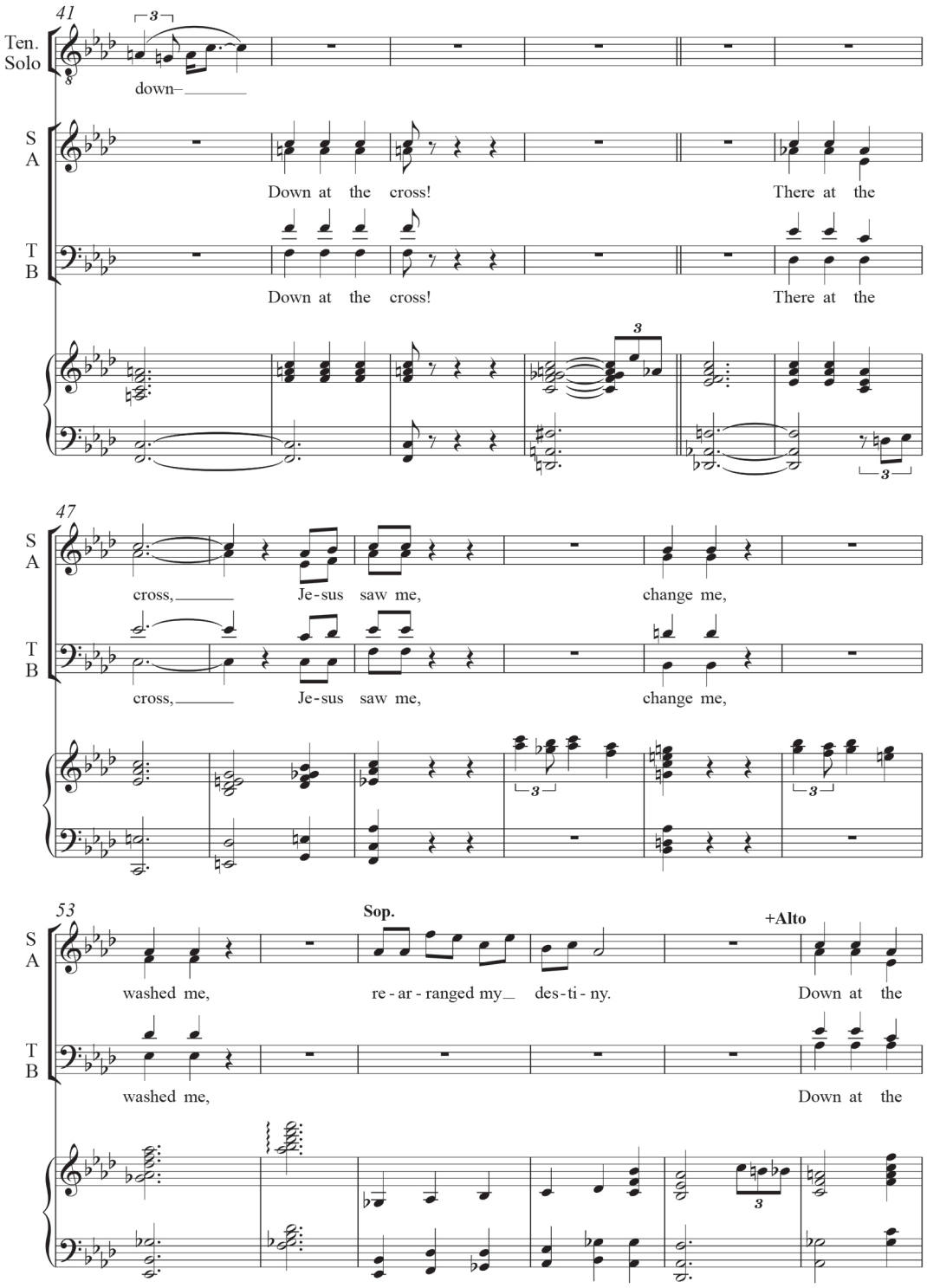

Figure 6. Thomas Whitfield, *Down at the Cross,* mm. 41–58. Chorus excerpt

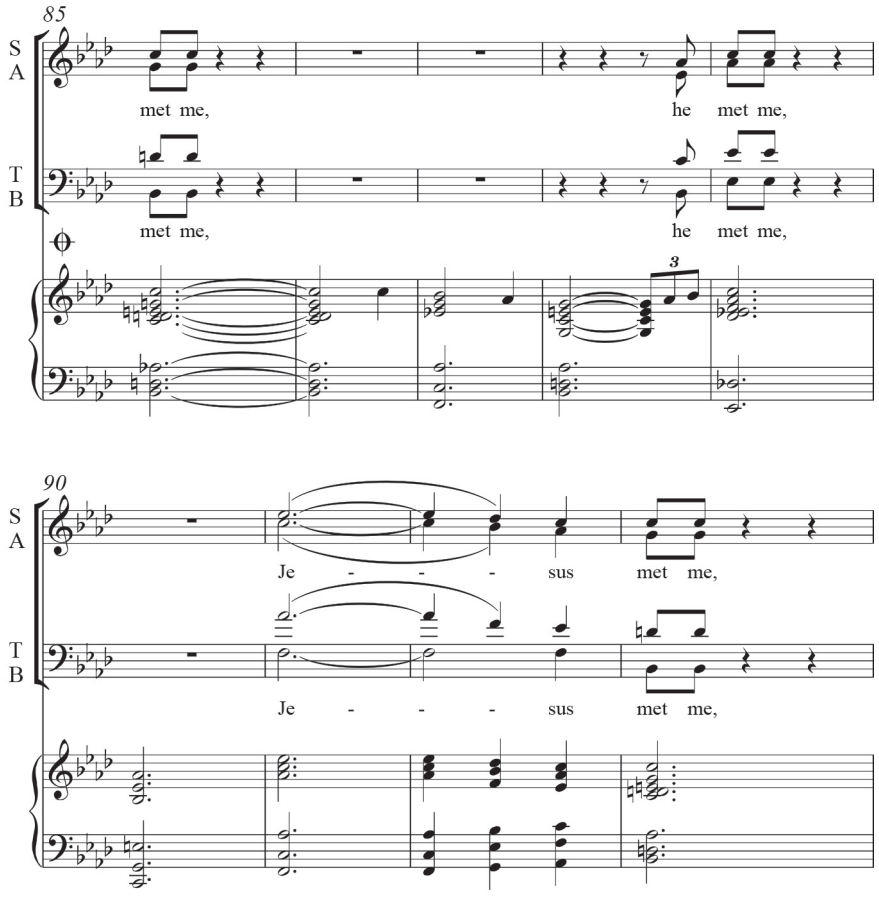

Figure 7. Thomas Whitfield, *Down at the Cross,* mm. 85–93.
Vamp excerpt

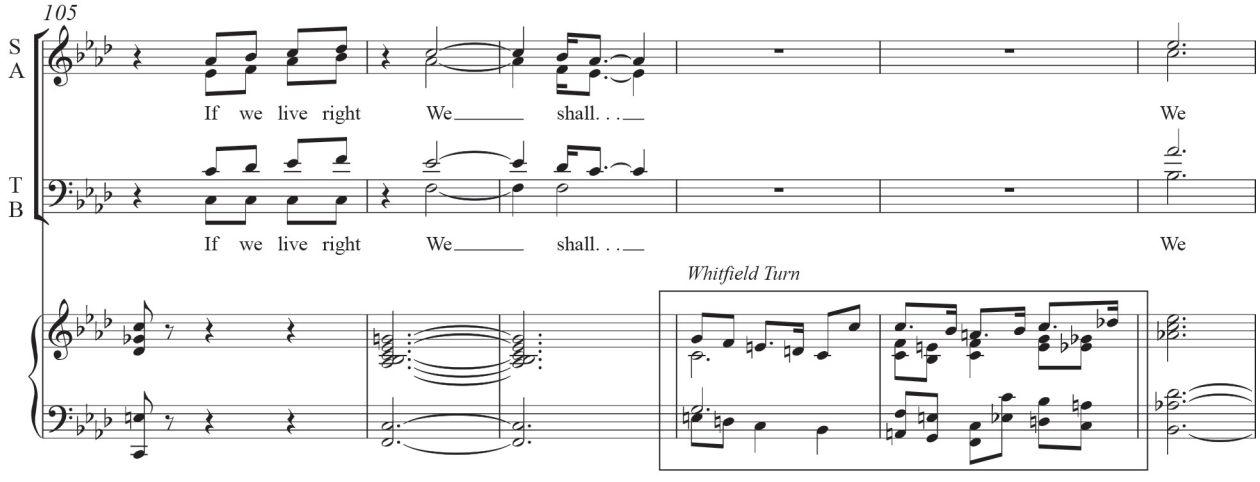

Figure 8. Thomas Whitfield, *Only a Look,* mm. 105–110.
Vamp excerpt
Transcribed from recording

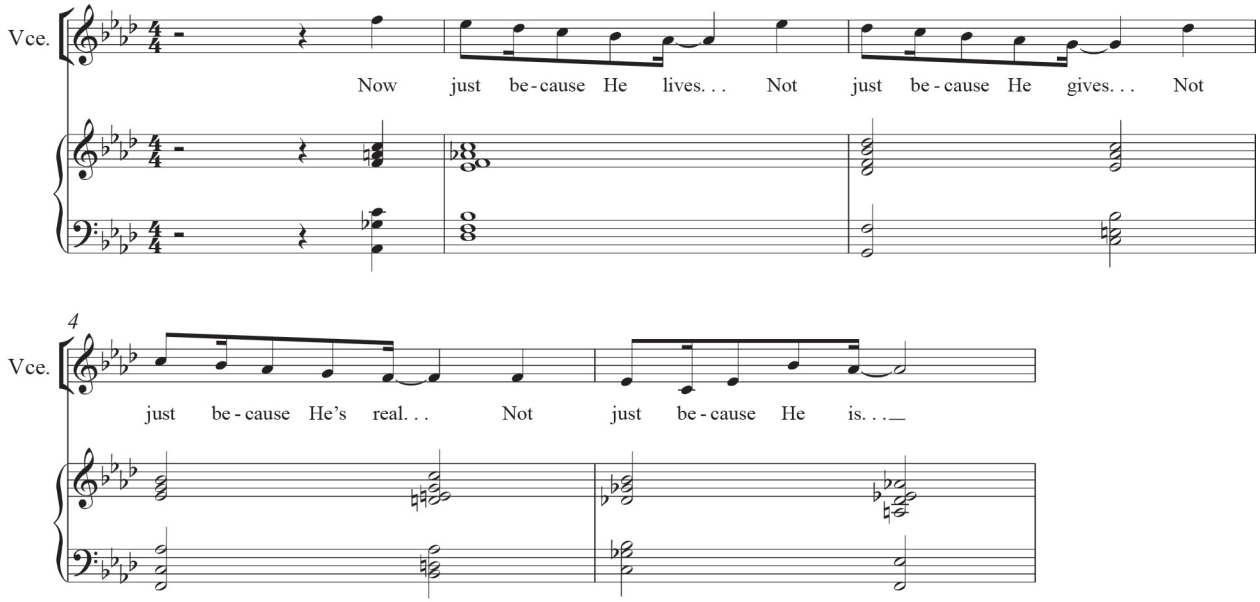

Figure 9. Thomas Whitfield, *Oh, How I Love Jesus,* mm. 1–5.
Refrain
Transcribed from recording

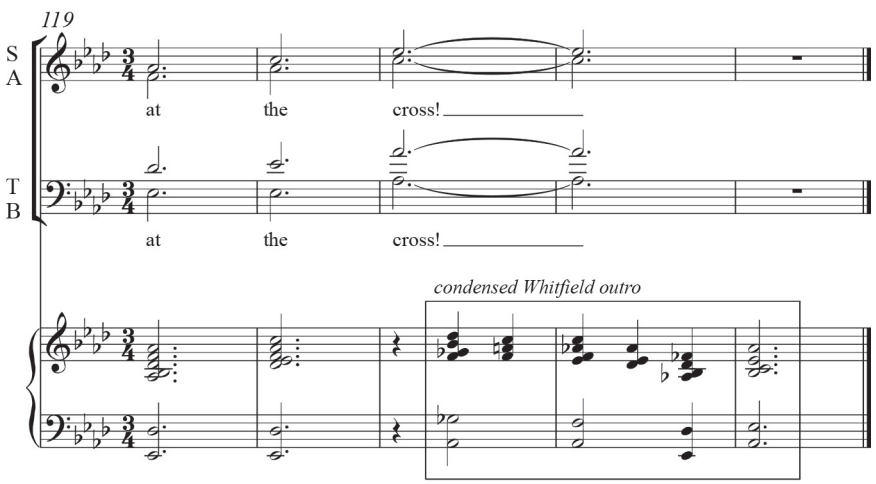

Figure 10. Thomas Whitfield, *Down at the Cross,* mm. 119–123.
Ending

This definitive Whitfield outro places a through-composed melody over a pedal-tone progression utilizing suspended and diminished chords, as well as an augmented non-chord tone that is prevalent in his writing. The outro is heard in its clearest form at the end of "We Need a Word from the Lord" from his *My Faith* album.

Whitfield even redefined the harmonic approach to the more up-tempo Pentecostal shout songs, fusing extended harmonies into the traditional gospel-blues form. His introit to "Praise His Name" begins with an almost jarring series of stacked and suspended chords before transitioning with a traditional gospel ascending progression to tonic as the choir enters (Figure 11).

For extra measure, Whitfield created an instrumental shout progression of his own, clearly an homage to his mentor Alfred Bolden's famed "Jesus" shout progression. The Whitfield shout is first heard via recording on "Let Everything Praise Him" from *Alive and Satisfied* (Figure 12).

The aural impact of Whitfield's revelatory blending of gospel, jazz, and classicism in his writing has dominated the sound of gospel music for the past several decades. Inventive hymn arrangements such as Kurt Carr's "Holy, Holy, Holy," James Hall's "The Blood," and Donald Lawrence's "Sweet Little Jesus Boy," are clear descendants of the songwriting form Whitfield established in his hymn settings. Gospel instrumentalists

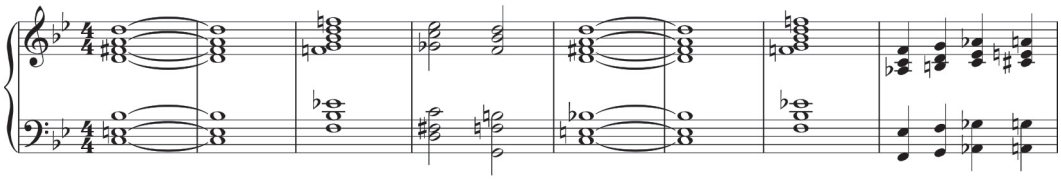

Figure 11. Thomas Whitfield, *Praise His Name,* mm. 1–8.
Introduction
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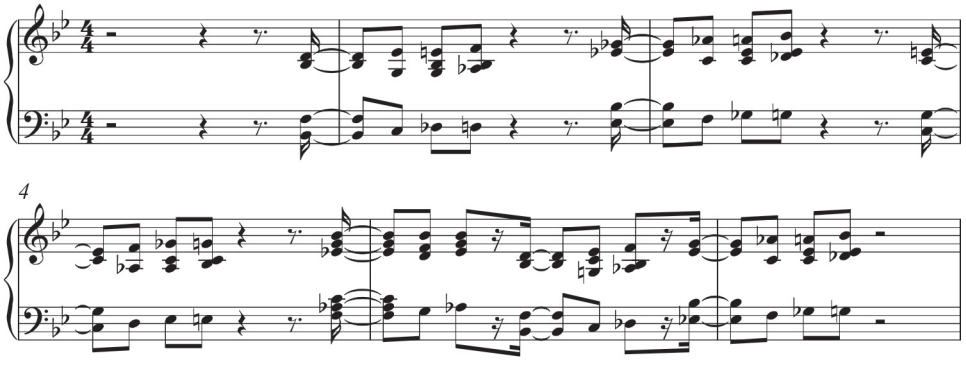

Figure 12. Thomas Whitfield, *Let Everything Praise Him,* mm. 1–6.
"Whitfield Shout"
Transcribed from recording

have utilized many of his trademark creations, such as the Whitfield shout (Rudolph Stanfield's "Hold On"), the Whitfield turn (Michael Fletcher's "Everything I Need I Found in God"), and the Whitfield outro (Rodnie Bryant's "We Offer Praise"). Kurt Carr even used the theme of a famous Whitfield vamp, from "Peace Be Still," in his "Peace In the Midst of Your Storm."

Gospel historian and critic Charles Clency wrote of Whitfield's music as "a unique blend of lyricism, classicism, diatonicism, chromaticism, Pentecostal rhythmic fervor, and unusual harmonic stacking."[12] While what Whitfield introduced to gospel music was harmonically "unusual" in the late '70s and early '80s, it has become today's norm. The Whitfield Sound is the harmonic vocabulary of contemporary gospel music.

Creating Orchestral Textures

Thomas Whitfield was an avid moviegoer. Such leisure served as his primary means of respite outside of a steadily busying music career. Whitfield, however, did not attend these movies simply for entertainment value:

> I sit there and watch the screen and block out all the background music. Then I score it in my head. I'd love to do a movie score. To just sit down and watch a theme, then make the music to fit every mood and feeling, that would be a great challenge to me. I think that would be fantastic.[13]

Whitfield's penchant for movie orchestration brought cinematic scope to gospel music. As Master Producer of the 1980s, his exhaustive volume of work during the decade led a revolution in innovative production techniques in gospel music recording as well as created new and inventive avenues for producers and instrumentalists alike.

When Whitfield began recording with the Company in the late '70s, Black gospel music had only recently begun to widen its purview to the use of instruments other than the piano, organ, and occasional drum set. Seemingly secular instruments such as electric bass and guitar had long been a source of controversy in the gospel music genre and were just as of the past decade showing more of a presence in gospel music recordings. Whitfield sought to further push the envelope.

The first volume of the *Things That We Believe* project demonstrates Whitfield's inventive orchestration. In the album notes Whitfield is credited as conductor, orchestrator, and arranger, as well as acoustic and electric keyboardist. The instrumental lineup is expansive, with timpani, drums, rhythm and lead guitar, trumpet, trombone, congas, and harp. Added to these is the use of "Special Moog Effects."[14]

From the opening of the album, Whitfield creates a scene reminiscent of a cinematic prelude. "Dawn of Hope" begins with a lone note intoned by a string patch on the synthesizer before being joined by wind sound effects. Soon after, the trumpeter enters along with the bass, presenting a semi-ostinato foundation as the other instruments enter to build momentum. The choir comes in at the peak of the piece, vocalizing an anthemic melody on a classically rounded "ah" as the synthesized symphonic texture surrounds them. As the prelude dies down, the wind sound effects resume, seamlessly transitioning into the first formal song of the album, "This is My Prayer."

"Dawn of Hope" represents a move in a new direction in terms of a gospel music production. While the use of synthesizers was not entirely unprecedented, Whitfield broadened the concept to encompass more orchestral textures in his writing.[15] As Crouch's music took a turn toward the Contemporary Christian side with more funk and soul infused sources, Whitfield created an aural world imbued with classicized and jazz-tinged influences that were still firmly rooted in gospel music.

Things That We Believe, Vols. 1 & 2 represents a balancing of the performative and creative partnership of voice and instrument in gospel music. Whitfield places brief instrumental interludes ("Reflect") in both volumes. These interludes constitute another hallmark of the Whitfield Sound, granting more improvisatory license to the band. "Saints in Flight" from the *My Faith* album is a three-and-a-half-minute straight-ahead jazz piece solely featuring the band. "Oft Times and Wonders" from *Alive and Satisfied* is also purely instrumental, albeit more of a thematic reprise of the vamp from an earlier track, "Oh, Hallelujah."

During the 1980s, Whitfield reached a zenith of exploratory genius in terms of production quality. Dr. Birgitta Johnson wrote:

> By the mid-eighties Whitfield was fully utilizing MIDI sequencers, the most significant development in synthesizer technology at that time. His pioneering use of MIDI synthesizers in gospel also helped to define the Whitfield Sound. With MIDI synthesizers, Whitfield could incorporate string sound presets and the variety of electric keyboard sounds already popular in secular music (e.g., the clavinet, Moog, strings, horns, percussion, and sound effects).[16]

Projects such as *Hold Me,* Armstrong's *Peace Be Still,* Adams's *Just As I Am,* and Pringle's *Perfect Peace* cemented Whitfield's status as a sought-after producer whose exploration of sound influenced gospel music production standards for years to come. Whether it be the lush string and E.P. underlay in *Hold Me's* "Psalms," the stormy and rushing wind effect that prefaces "Peace Be Still," the jazz-infused sax and bell melody that begins *Just As I Am's* "I Am," or the haunting horn entrance of "Perfect Peace," the Whitfield Sound developed into an unmistakable aural sensation, further defining his musical presence.

As distinctive as the Whitfield Sound is, it never overtook the unique sound of each artist with whom he worked. "He got into the heart of the artist," said Donald Lawrence. "He knew how to find it, and he even matched them with the right song. Once he found the right song, he put his arrangement to it, and gave them the space to sing. There was just nothing like it. With the background vocals, the arrangements, the approach to chords and progressions," Lawrence said, "you knew that it was Whitfield."

Steven Ford likened Whitfield's gift as a consummate producer to the relationship between language and dialect. For all of the varied artists with whom he worked, Ford stated that "Thomas was able to change dialect, although we understood it was his language."[17] As the Master Producer, Whitfield influenced not only the way gospel music producers approach the inclusion of sound but also the placement of it. He is the Father of Modern Gospel Music Production.

Deepening of Intimacy in Gospel Song Lyrics

Oh, my saints you forget how to call me by name…

When you sing or you preach of the one who is real…

Is it shame or for fame that you push me away…

Can you know how I feel that I died so you might live today…

Just in case you've forgotten my name…

It's Jesus…

I'm Jesus Christ.

Whitfield penned these lyrics to the song "Just In Case You've Forgotten" in response to a heartfelt conversation with Gwen Morton about his place in gospel music ministry. Kirk Franklin stated that the lyrics felt "very romantic, like God was a person that was affected by our rejection."[18] He said, "When I'm getting ready to go onstage or to undertake a life-changing event, I'll listen to it in my headphones because it helps me focus, and reminds me of what it is I do and why I do it."[19]

The personification and romanticism of Jesus Christ in gospel song lyrics was revelatory even in 1991, when the song was released at the end of Whitfield's *My Faith* album.[20] Whitfield, nearing the end of his life, experienced a career-long transformation not only in his music but in his lyricism. The texts he penned became as elevated as the harmonies he wrote. This departure from traditional Black church rhetoric affirmed Whitfield's position as forerunner in Black praise and worship music.

Precious Jesus, now I love you…

How I lift high my voice with your praise…

Holy Spirit, I implore thee…

Drench my heart as my lips hark your praise…

I am persuaded, Lord to love you…

I have been changed to bless your name…
I am constrained by this great gospel…
Forever to worship thee.

Dr. Deborah Smith Pollard said that Whitfield grabbed her attention when he began to use words such as "extol" and "constrained" in his lyrics. She had not previously heard such words used in gospel music. "Precious Jesus," from the *Alive and Satisfied* album, has become one of the genre's defining praise and worship anthems. The text, however, is more than a simple declaration. Lyrics like "*now I love you*" and "*I have been changed*" illustrate a journey to relationship with Christ.

Donald Lawrence noted that the way Whitfield set lyrics was often "visual, and very storytelling." Lawrence, who is also appreciated for the deep sensitivity of his lyrics, called Whitfield a "great picture painter with his lyrics." He related the text of "Hold Me" to that of a theatrical monologue.

Hold me, when I feel my every foe…
Hold me, when my heart is getting cold…
Hold me, when I just don't understand…
Hold me, and I won't let go Your hand…
I want to rest in You.

Even though the actor is alone on the stage, it is generally clear to whom he or she is speaking. Lawrence defined praise and worship as "singing to God and telling Him how you feel about Him…that conversation between the two of you." What he appreciated about Whitfield's approach is that "he did it based on his heart." The intimacy of his lyricism was such that he invited the listener into his communication with God.

Bishop Yvette Flunder, a founding voice in the development of contemporary gospel music, said she loved the way Whitfield "sang passionately about his love for Jesus. It wasn't religious. It was a personal relationship."[21] Whitfield wrote songs that "talked to God, and talked about intimacy." Flunder referred to his songs as "prayer with wings."

Hallelujah, Anyhow…
Hallelujah, Anyhow.
Just keep on praising Him…
Hallelujah, Anyhow.

Here Whitfield's lyricism explores the depth of simplicity. Dr. Birgitta Johnson wrote that his "praise and worship music includes the congregational singing which calls for more unison parts and simple melodies that encourage communal participation."[22] Whitfield's narrative efforts encouraged the vertically motivated worship associated with the developing form at that time. Company songs like "Hallelujah, Anyhow" and "Dear Jesus," for example, introduced praise and worship to the Black church community.

Lillian Lloyd stated that Whitfield "made us become lovers of God even the more just on his testimony." Extending from the narrative gifts of his mentor Rev. James Cleveland, Whitfield often introduced an aura of worship in his narrations, exhorting the audience in a participatory communion. Lloyd recounted Whitfield's prefacing narration to "Hallelujah, Anyhow":

> After I kept walking with the Lord and walking with Him and walking with Him…I learned that a few trials would come. A few things would try to take me off course. But there was one word that he put deep in my 'members. He put the word 'Hallelujah.'

JoAnn Hill Brown said that she once believed that all lyrical content in music had to rhyme until Whitfield penned "Dear Jesus." When this statement was presented to Ford, he likened Whitfield's writing to that of German Lieder. In Lieder, Ford maintained that the lyrical content is "foremost." It is "poetry without rhyme."

Dear Jesus, Son of the Living God…
We extol You, and adore You…
Dear Jesus…
Oh, Jesus…
You have my praise.

"Dear Jesus" is intriguing not only because of the choice of text but also because of the rhythmic underlay of the lyrics. Whitfield presents the text in a classicized recitative form, and the choir follows suit. The speech-like nature of recitative further enhances the concept of the conversational nature of Whitfield's lyricism.

Whitfield often transitioned from the conversational nature of his music to promoting spoken communication with God during concerts and recordings. He encouraged the enhancement of personal intimacy in worship throughout the song and afterwards. Johnson wrote that Whitfield included worship interludes on several of his albums, including "Sacrifices of Praise" from *Hallelujah Anyhow.* Johnson also noted that the track "consists of the audience and choir engaged in collective improvisation and musical praise over a pedal point in D-flat major held by the band."[23] With the live studio concept that Whitfield introduced to gospel music, he was able to recreate the worship aesthetic at the end of songs such as "Precious Jesus/Worship Overture" and "His Eye Is On The Sparrow."

> *We don't need another political uprising…*
>
> *We don't need another conqueror on the scene…*
>
> *What we need is a special word that will burn within our hearts…*
>
> *And give us direction from above…*
>
> *We need a word from the Lord.*

In an attempt to make gospel music more palatable to nontraditional churchgoers, composers began to utilize more indefinite pronouns in their writing, such as he, you, and it. It was certainly not uncommon for one to listen to the radio during the '80s and '90s and to become completely enraptured by a song without any knowledge of the piece's undergirding lyrical intent. Many of contemporary gospel's most famous artists often found their music played in clubs and other more secularly themed venues.

Whitfield, whose lyrical content never wavered in its staunch presentation, responded to the artistic conundrum:

> Gospel songs say things that people who have problems can take home with them. People who feel as if their lives have no purpose used to be able to hold on to a gospel song. It was something that gave you hope until your prayers were answered. If gospel lyrics and songs do not relay that same sense of hope and peace, then we are failing. If we lose the hope, then we've lost the purity of gospel music.[24]

Songs such as "We Need a Word from the Lord," "With My Whole Heart," and "Lift Those Hands and Bless Him" may have certainly blurred the already amorphous line between gospel and Black praise and worship music, especially during a time when the term "praise and worship" was not fully realized in the Black church. Regardless of category, however, Whitfield's lyrics remained pure whether they were "mountain high" or "valley low" in concept. Lyricism as it relates to textual considerations is just as much a part of the music-making process as is singing and playing. The Whitfield Sound is audible proof of such.

Conclusions

For all of the genre defining work of his contemporaries, such as Andraé Crouch, Walter and Edwin Hawkins, only Thomas Whitfield's name invokes an aural vocabulary that distinctly details his sound. The Whitfield Company helped to define the sound with an unprecedented level of technique, detail and precision in gospel music choirs. Whitfield further developed the sound with his inventive blending of gospel, jazz, and classical harmonies, progressions, and forms. As the Master Producer, Whitfield created orchestral textures in gospel music that developed not only his own distinctive sound, but also that of artists such as Vanessa Bell Armstrong and Yolanda Adams. Finally, Whitfield's art-song-like interpretation of lyricism unveiled the intimacy of gospel music, setting the stage for Black praise and worship. Earl Wright, Jr., Whitfield's longtime musical collaborator, wrote this of the Whitfield Sound:

In its completed form, it became a prophetically timeless spiritual music and choral worship expression that went straight to the heart, bypassing words, arrangements and notes! It's not what we hear, it's what we feel! The Whitfield Sound became the outward worship expression of the gift that God planted deep, deep down in the soul of my friend and bro, Min. Thomas A. Whitfield. Gone but not forgotten![25] CJ

NOTES

[1] Donald Lawrence, in discussion with the author, March 2019.

[2] Dr. Tony McNeill, in discussion with the author, March 2019.

[3] Donna Harris, in discussion with the author, September 2018. All subsequent statements by Harris are from this conversation. Harris is a former president of the Whitfield Company.

[4] Donald Lawrence, in discussion with the author, July 2018. All subsequent statements by Lawrence are from this conversation.

[5] Refer to Legg's article "A Taxonomy of Musical Gesture in African American Gospel Music" for a more in-depth description of these techniques. Andrew Legg, "A Taxonomy of Musical Gesture in African American Gospel Music," *Popular Music* 29, no. 1. (2010): 103-129.

[6] Lillian Lloyd, in conversation with the author, January 2018.

[7] Lydia Wright, in conversation with the author, March 2019.

[8] Scott Bard-Mansur, in conversation with the author, December 2017.

[9] Tyrone Block, in conversation with the author, January 2018.

[10] Richard Smallwood, in conversation with the author, February 2018.

[11] Raymond Wise, "On Teaching Students to Compose in the Gospel Genre: The Work of Raymond Wise," in *Musicianship: Composing in Choir,* ed. Jody L. Kerchner and Katherine Strand (Chicago: GIA Publications, Inc., 2016), 210.

[12] Charles Clency, in conversation with the author, March 2019.

[13] Joyce Walker-Tyson, "The Whitfield sound is soaring high in heavenly music," *Detroit Free Press,* September 14, 1981, 8F.

[14] Moog, another American manufacturer of electronic musical instruments, developed the Minimoog in 1970. It became one of the most impactful instruments in the field.

[15] Crouch, Cleveland, and the Hawkinses had previously utilized synthesizers in their respective projects.

[16] Birgitta Johnson, "Oh, For A Thousand Tongues to Sing: Music and Worship in African American Megachurches of Los Angeles, California" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 2008), 295.

[17] Steven Ford, in discussion with the author, February 2018. All subsequent statements by Ford are from this discussion.

[18] Adelle Platon, "Kirk Franklin on Gospel Music's Past, Present & Future," *Tidal* online, February 12, 2018, http://read.tidal.com/article/black-history-month-2018-kirk-franklin-past-present-future.

[19] Roy Trakin, "Kirk Franklin: The Message of "Why," Lyrics & Stevie Wonder," Recording Academy Grammy Awards online, September 5, 2017, https://www.grammy.com/grammys/news/kirk-franklin-message-why-lyrics-stevie-wonder.

[20] Whitfield recorded the song again as the penultimate track on *Alive and Satisfied.* This time he performed it as a vocal solo.

[21] Bishop Yvette Flunder, in discussion with the author, August 2018. All subsequent statements by Flunder are from this discussion.

[22] Johnson, 293.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Christian, "Gospel moves."

[25] Earl Wright, Jr., in conversation with the author, March 2019.