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**Objective:**

Sydney's A Cappella Gospel Choir: The impact of ethnicity and religion on Gospel Music; comparing a white gospel choir to a black gospel choir.

In this ethnographic project I have examined the impact of ethnicity and religion on Gospel music, comparing a white gospel choir to a black gospel choir. Sydney's a cappella choir, "The Honeybees" are a non-profit community group, who are located at the Wayside Chapel in Potts Point. As stated by the general manager, The Honeybees are not a religious based choir, though it is made up of both religious and non-religious people from all different backgrounds. Their repertoire is made up of many traditional spiritual gospel songs and the more modern gospel- inspired songs, which draw from soul, R&B and jazz styles of music. This interested me as I aimed to find out how being religious or non-religious affects the performance styles being utilized and how an all white gospel group compares to a black group.

**Process:**

The journey that I have embarked on for this Ethnographic Research Project has been a process of gaining qualitative and quantitative information through interview and observation. My time line for this was over a period of 12 weeks, where I conducted both primary and secondary research. This included primary research of both interviewing choir members and observing them in a rehearsal where I was to discover many similarities and differences between a white gospel choir and a black gospel choir. My secondary research has involved extensive reading, while also watching YouTube videos of the Harlem Gospel Choir to compare the performance stylings of a black gospel choir to a white gospel choir.

I began my project by brain storming ideas on what to research. I started off by thinking about what I was apart of musically in high school and what styles of music interest me. I thought about researching Musica Viva and why they educate schools, the decline of live music venues, the impact that reality TV shows like 'The Voice' or 'X Factor' have on record labels, and flamenco music. Deciding to go in the direction of Gospel music, I pursued Wollongong Gospel Choir first, who unfortunately

declined due to lack of numbers. Although the director declined, he was very lovely and suggested some other choirs that I could pursue. When I defined my thesis, I then emailed the Honeybees choir, who agreed to have me come along to one of their rehearsals. Once I got confirmation that I had a group, I started doing some secondary research into the traditions of Gospel Music and wrote up a set of questions for both the director of the choir and its members. My questions at first were blunt. In wanting to find out if religion impacts Gospel music and the way it is performed, I wanted to ask people if they were in fact religious. After some guidance, I had to define my questions and make them broader. So instead of asking someone if they were religious directly, I needed to ask an open-ended question like 'what brings you back each week?' so they could tell me in their own way. Open and forthcoming, when I attended The Honeybees Choir rehearsal, everyone was friendly and welcoming. I found everyone lovely to talk to and everyone was very honest and forthcoming with their answers. Walking away with an abundance of information, even though I only spoke to 7 people, I felt like I discovered everything I set out to discover. I observed what I wanted to and I walked away with plenty of interesting material to write my report.

The only issues I faced along the way was that my first gospel choir declined, as their numbers had diminished. So finding a new choir to observe and interview added to my time frame. After finding one it was pretty smooth sailing. Another issue I had was when I was interviewing. I was given permission to conduct my interviews in the Honeybees rehearsal break, which was hard to gather people in a quiet environment. I could hear everyone fine, although when the group went back to rehearse, the director encouraged people to still come and talk to me. Although I could hear them fine at the time, going back through my recordings to transcribe meant that I had to listen hard and have my volume on full ball and even had to EQ some of them to hear the interviews properly, minimizing background noise.

### **Case Study:**

For this ethnography, the 'hands-on' method of research was necessary in determining the impact of ethnicity and religion on this particular local music culture. I aimed to interview both male and female participants in a non-biased approach. With many open ended questions; I aimed to discover many things with my research, ranging from the differences between a white gospel choir and a black gospel choir to whether or not religion impacts the way this style of music is performed. I wanted to discover why the members of the choir had joined and why this music is significant to them as white people. Is it because of their religion or just for the love of music?

For this research to be effective, I have had to research the traditions of black gospel music, to gain a better understanding of the differences and/or similarities that I have aimed to observe. My initial objective as I observed the choir was to compare the vocal stylings and performance styles to that of a black choir, where I wanted to see the differences in movements and vocal technique. Where members of a black gospel choir may take on a spiritual persona and raise their arms in a classic "Praise The Lord" movement, I wanted to see if this differs in the non-religious based white gospel choir. I also observed if the white gospel choir takes on a rhythmically involved persona, and whether they use traditional vocal stylings.

The interesting thing about Sydney's Honeybees choir is the non-religious status and their Caucasian make-up. As a result of this, I was interested to find out the different types of ethnicities and if this lead to differences in the way the music is performed also. I have also noted what traditions of Gospel Music they are trying to emanate. By using secondary sources, I have been able to research the traditions of black gospel choirs to determine the similarities and differences between the two choirs.

By studying the Honeybees choir, I have been able to observe how they rehearse and perform in a comfortable environment as a Caucasian based choir. My goal for this assignment was to observe any differences in the styles of performances and to observe member's rhythmic authority. Based on the impact of ethnicity and religion, I wanted to understand why Gospel music is significant to the members of The Honeybees Choir.

Approved by the director of the choir to attend a rehearsal for "The Honeybees" choir on Tuesday the 15th of October from 7-9pm, I conducted my interviews with members of the group in their tea break at 8pm. Within this rehearsal I observed the group at work to gain information based on their individual performances.

By 7:15, there were 25 people in attendance. They began by standing in a circle to blend their voices in vocal warm ups. Each member responded to musical cues well, illustrating that they all had some musical experience in some way. Coinciding with the oral traditions of Gospel music, I was told that the Choir learns their songs all by ear. The director really evoked rhythmic authority and got very involved in the performance. He was very involved with his musical cues and lead the group to clap. This allowed each individual to take on a rhythmically involved persona as they all clapped on the 'and' of each beat and stamped their feet on the beat. This again is evidence of gospel tradition. Although the choir took on a rhythmically involved persona, their movements were unregulated and although their movements were unregulated, they needed to be succinct and on the spot, as everyone had to be doing the same thing. For performing reasons, the ensemble had to minimize their movements. Though during a solo, the soloist was able to improvise their movements with large hand gestures, closing of the eyes and body movements. This was different to a traditional black gospel choir, who contain more impromptu movements in their performances. Vocally, the honeybees were divided into soprano, alto, tenor and bass ranges. They used techniques such as vocal melisma's, call and response and field hollering. These vocal techniques are characteristics of traditional gospel music.

By interviewing and observing I have gained both qualitative and quantitative information. Conducting my interviews in the Wayside Chapel was more difficult than I initially thought. As the choir socialized with each other, people who felt comfortable being interviewed approached me. These recordings were clear, as it was a casual conversation with my interviewee, with little background noise. After 3 interviews, most of the choir resumed their rehearsal. This however didn't mean that I stopped interviewing. The director encouraged people to be interviewed by me while they rehearsed, and so they did. As they began rehearsing again, I continued to interview a further 3 people. Listening back to the recording, it was a bit harder to transcribe

these interviews due to the large dynamic of the choir. I asked a range of questions which I chose from my following list:

Why did you join this choir?

Do you regularly attend a church?

Why is this music significant to you?

Do you come from a musical background?

Is your culture very musical?

How much performance experience do you have?

How long have you been a member of the "Honeybees" choir?

How do you feel after each rehearsal?

What brings you back week after week?

How does singing a cappella as a group affect your performance? Is it easy or hard?

How closely do you base your performances on the traditional gospel style performance?

Do you try to emanate a certain groove in your movements when performing?

I also interviewed the director after the rehearsal had finished, which was in a quieter environment. I chose these questions from a separate list I manufactured for him personally:

Have you always been involved in choirs most of your life?

What are the benefits of directing a choir of this size?

How do you feel after each rehearsal?

What sort of community events do you usually perform for?

What elements of gospel do you try to include in this choir?

When you begin directing a new song, do you have a vision of what you want the performance to look like?

Do you like to see your choir perform with rhythmic authority?

From these two sets of questions I received an array of great answers. Although I only informally interviewed 7 people, I received the information necessary for me to complete my analysis.

### **Literature Review:**

- “Gospel, meaning ‘good news,’ derived its name from its close connection with the gospels (books in the New Testament). As we look at the common themes in the gospels of St. Mathew, St. Mark, St. Luke, and St. John, we find many references to God’s goodness and mercy” (Slaughter 2013).
  
- No style restrictions on gospel music; only the thematic content remains constant (Slaughter 2013).
  
- Oral tradition that uses a great deal of repetition (Slaughter 2013).
  
- The uniting theme us that the material performed is straight out of the churches with little deliberate pop sheen, and could have come easily from any Sunday morning service in the past century (Traditional Gospel 2013).
  
- Black music is unity music. It unites the joy and sorrow, the love and the hate, the hope and the despair of black people; and it moves the people toward the direction of total liberation. It shapes and defines black being and creates cultural structures for black expression. Black music is unifying because it confronts the individual with the truth of black existence and affirms that black being is possible only in a communal context (Cone 1992, p. 5).
  
- Gospel music was derived from religion and rhythm (Darden 2004, p. 8).
  
- Influenced by the Civil War (Darden 2004, p. 7).
  
- Began in Africa. Most Africans rarely separated music and dance (Darden 2004, p. 24).

- Religious themes- “In Africa a general belief in a single (usually) all-powerful god”. This was called ‘slave religion’, which “shows how the West Africans would eventually adapt so quickly to Christianity once in Americas and ties that acceptance to both the general African belief in a single creator god and the similarity between the Christian rite of Baptism and various West African river cults (Darden 2004, p. 26).
- Characteristics: Field hollering taken from work songs, Call and response, Religious themes, rhythmic authority, vocal melisma’s, choreography common in black gospel choirs, upbeat, uplifting feel, Blending of voices, Bass section sings the bass line in A cappella to create harmonic structure, vibrato prominent in vocal stylings (East Coast Entertains- YouTube).
- Oral traditions, songs learned by ear, passed down (Slaughter 2013).

### **Analysis and Conclusion:**

"Even though I'm singing about Jesus all the time it's more about human condition and people connecting" (Interview C- Kevin, 15.10.13), rather than singing gospel music for the spiritual connection. This Idea was conveyed by one of the Honeybees choir members when asked if he tries to emanate a traditional gospel persona. "There are no style restrictions on gospel music; only the thematic content remains constant" (Slaughter 2013). From my primary and secondary research I have discovered that there is no real impact on performance styles based on ethnicity or religion. Not directly asking what ethnicity people are, I could observe that most people were of Caucasian descent, with only one or two looking of Hispanic descent. When asked how this music affects people spiritually, the conclusion was that no one I spoke to was affected spiritually and therefore there was little to no religious impact on gospel music for white people.

I feel that by observing this choir, I have found differences but also many similarities between a white gospel choir and a black gospel choir. Learning their songs by ear in an oral tradition, The Honeybees choir produce the same characteristics as in traditional Gospel. "Featured soloists are a big part of the gospel tradition and we don't have a backing group. A lot of gospel groups will have bass guitar, drum kit, but we do it a cappella, so the bass part will replicate was the bass guitar would be doing. So that's a lot of follow through with the gospel traditions" (Interview G- Steve, 15.10.13). As Steve explains here, The Honeybees Choir illustrates their traditional themes throughout their repertoire and their unique a-cappella make up. I think that this is a defining factor in comparing a white gospel choir to a black gospel choir. I think it is all about feeling the rhythm of the music. With no musical accompaniment, it is harder for the Honeybees to emanate a rhythmic authority, in comparison to the Harlem Gospel Choir, who with the use of musical accompaniment tend to evoke more energy and feel as they are moving along to the music.

In spite of this, through the use of field hollering, call and response, religious themes, rhythmic authority and vocal melisma's, along with their upbeat and uplifting energy (Refer to CD in Supplementary Recourses- Track 1), as a group, the Honeybees have tried to emanate as much Gospel tradition in their performances as they can.

These characteristics are all evidence that The Honeybees choir have followed African Gospel traditions and emanate the traditional stylings of Gospel Music. Their only difference would be that as a group, they must limit their movements. For performance aesthetics, their movements have to be succinct, unregulated and on the spot. This is to ensure everyone is doing the same thing. Although when soloists were singing, their movements were not apart of the group. Take Jenny for example when she performed a lead role in "Shine". With her eyes closed, her hand movements were large, which created juxtaposition among the group, which held more similarity to a traditional black gospel choir. This was nice to see as I could feel the emotion and energy that was being evoked. So although The Honeybees contain rhythmic authority, they must limit their movements in order to work together as a group. Their movements must be succinct, where in a black gospel choir; their movements are freer and contain more impromptu movements.

From early on I have wanted to discover why the members of the choir had joined and why this music is significant to them as white people. Is it because of their religion or just for the love of music? Well to my surprise, most people joined the choir either because they knew the first director, and loved to sing or because they just loved singing and loved how being in a community made them feel. As stated by the director "we sing gospel music but we can't pretend to be from the black community so we have to be very careful about not co-opting those identities. So we sing the music because we love the music" (Interview G- Steve, 15.10.13). As a result of this, I have deemed that religion and ethnicity are not a factor in why this music is significant to people. The members of the Honeybees choir just have a passion and a love of music, in particular- Gospel music.

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1. Amanda: 15. October. 2013. Wayside Chapel Kings Cross. See Interview A.
2. Paul: 15. October. 2013. Wayside Chapel Kings Cross. See Interview B.
3. Kevin: 15. October. 2013. Wayside Chapel Kings Cross. See Interview C.
4. Sue: 15. October. 2013. Wayside Chapel Kings Cross. See Interview D.
5. Daniel: 15. October. 2013. Wayside Chapel Kings Cross. See Interview E.
6. Julie: 15. October. 2013. Wayside Chapel Kings Cross. See Interview F.
7. Steve: 15. October. 2013. Wayside Chapel Kings Cross. See Interview G.