

The Saxophone as a Solo Instrument in Gospel Music:
The Musical Contributions of Dr. Vernard Johnson

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Abstract

Dr. Vernard Johnson (b.1948) is an African American musician who introduced the saxophone as a solo instrument to the gospel music tradition in the black church.¹ Though Johnson is not the first to play the saxophone in church, he is the one who popularized and blazed the trail for other instrumentalists to appear as soloists with choral accompaniment. Previously, instruments played a limited role as added features to the standard five-piece rhythm section, which consisted of organ, piano, drums, bass and lead guitars.² Because of Johnson's innovation, many pastors began to encourage young parishioners to bring their gifts of music to worship services. This document intends to show how Johnson left a Kansas City nightclub and brought the signature instrument of jazz into the sacred sanctuary of the church. Through interviews, testimonies, periodicals, concert reviews, solo recordings, and the author's experience as a Church of God in Christ minister, this research will detail how Johnson used his saxophone to place himself in the heart of the gospel community as a solo artist.

¹ Michael Pellecchia, "Blowing For Jesus," *The Dallas Observer*, July 4, 1991.

² *Ibid*, 14.

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Introduction

There is an energetic atmosphere that permeates the auditorium of a sanctified downtown Kansas City music hall. People are shouting, dancing, screaming “Thank you Jesus, Praise the Lord,” and reaching a climatic crescendo of praise as participants from the pulpit area are delivering a gospel message through music. Not only does the presence of a choir and the typical instrumental stage band make an indelible impression on the minds of attendees, but so does the instrumental evangelist, Dr. Vernard Johnson, with his alto saxophone. Johnson builds an emotional frenzy among his audience as he elegantly plays “Amazing Grace.” As Johnson escalates from his low to high register, the crowd continues to show their gratitude with external expressions of encouragement. He raises the decibel level by punctuating the expressive high tones of the top register with passion and artistry.

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³ Michael Pellecchia, “Blowing For Jesus,” *The Dallas Observer*, July 4, 1991.

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Gospel music, like blues and jazz, has its roots in Negro spirituals as well as white Christian hymns. During the first Great Awakening, white preachers such as John and Charles Wesley, the founders of the United Methodist churches, published a *Collection of Psalms and Hymn* in 1737 and *Hymns and Sacred Poems* in 1739. George Whitfield (1714-70) published *A Collection of Hymns for Social Worship* (1753; 1765). Hymnist Isaac Watts (1674-1748) gave significance to gospel music in his publications that included *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*.⁵ Many of these songs were incorporated into the early black church worship services and became the foundation repertoire for gospel music. Among these songs is the popular hymn "Amazing Grace," which was written by John Newton, a former slave master who felt convicted of his atrocious acts of evil and testified to the divine grace of which he was bestowed through this beloved composition.⁶ These hymns provided strength to black Americans as they endured the daily persecutions imposed by their slave masters.

The organized black church was crucial to the development of gospel music. Bishop Richard Allen (b. 1760) founded and led the first predominantly black church, the African

⁵ Don Cusic, *The Sound of Light: A History of Gospel Music* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1990), 21.

⁶ Al Rogers, "Amazing Grace The Story of John Newton," *Away Here In Texas*, July-Aug 1996, reprint.

Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) in 1794.⁷ This Philadelphia establishment stands as the first recorded account of a congregation with black leadership in liturgical services. In this church, the sacred songs of black Americans came from both Christian hymns of the previous century and from spirituals. The Emancipation Proclamation (1863) gave black Americans special encouragement as this document announced the freedom of slaves from involuntary servitude. The freed slaves moved toward the formation of new churches, some of which were connected to existing bodies such as the A.M.E. as well as the newly formed Christian Methodist Episcopal (C.M.E.). The new churches created a center for new communities of free black citizens. A surge in erudition of black Americans brought about the transcribing of new works by black songwriters, particularly in the twentieth century. The Emancipation Proclamation so endeared Abraham Lincoln to the black community that a song, “Lift Every Voice and Sing” was written in 1900 by two brothers James Weldon and John Rosemond Johnson to commemorate Lincoln’s birthday.⁸ Also known as the Negro National Anthem, the song has served as a prelude to many African American churches and can be accompanied with heartfelt emotions of exclamatory “amens and hallelujahs.”

The Black Pentecostals, also referred to as “holiness” or “sanctified” churches, have many sects that make up the Pentecostal denominations. Gospel music is particularly important in these churches. Pentecostal churches employ energetic shouting, holy dancing, foot stomping, hand clapping, and speaking in tongues (an unknown prayer language that is believed to be a conversation between God and the participant). Songs were usually led by

⁷ Cusic, 85.

⁸ Eugene Levy, *James Weldon Johnson: Black Leader, Black Voice* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1973), 72.

women, who made up the personnel of the music department and oversaw the developing spiritual growth of the youth. Although women were forbidden to have pastoral or senior ministerial roles, they were often the most faithful parishioners and made up the majority of the membership of the church.⁹ Some men also participated in worship music as members of rhythm sections, formalized quartets, and choirs. In the Holiness churches, most of the music was performed and taught by rote, lifted from the voluntary voices of the “whosoever will.”¹⁰

The leading church among black Pentecostals was the Church of God In Christ, which was established by Bishop Charles H. Mason and Bishop C. P. E. Jones in 1897.¹¹ Mason and his colleague Bishop CPE Jones heard about a revival conducted by William J. Seymour held on Azusa Street in Los Angeles, California. Mason, Elder D.J. Young and Elder J.A. Jeter attended.

Jones, who at the time was the General Overseer, appointed Mason as Overseer of Tennessee. The turning point of the church came in 1907, when Mason and other ministers of the church which included Elder D.J. Young and Elder J.A. Jeter attended and embraced Seymour’s teachings on the fullness of the Holy Spirit. Seymour preached that one received the fullness of the “Holy Spirit” with the evidence of speaking in tongues. Speaking in tongues is an unknown prayer language between a participant and the Almighty.” When Mason, Jeter, and Young returned to Tennessee, they came with an electrically charged renewed faith and devotion to their beliefs. Mason began to proclaim to others that speaking in tongues was an outpouring of the Holy Spirit that was evidenced in speaking in tongues. Jones regarded the New Holy Spirit experience as delusional. Being unable to resolve their difference in doctrine, Mason and Jones stopped fellowshiping. Jones’ followers renamed themselves Church of Christ Holiness Incorporated and

⁹ Cusic, 87.

¹⁰ Horace Boyer, *The Golden Age of Gospel* (Urbana,IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 24.

¹¹ Elder C.F. Range, Jr., *Church of God In Christ Official Manual* (Memphis: Board of Publication of the Church of God In Christ, Incorporated,1973), XXVI.

Mason and his followers retained the name Church of God In Christ Incorporated.¹²

They testified that they had been “baptized in the fullness of the Holy Spirit,” which was the evidence of being filled with the Spirit and speaking in an unknown tongue as the Spirit gave utterance based on Acts 2:4. The act of speaking in tongues separated Mason and Jones from each other because Jones believed that the tongues were a gift from the Most High and that everyone may or may not receive that gift, which included interpretation of the unknown prayer language. Mason taught that the gift was absolutely essential to enable the Christian to live a life free from sin.¹³

The Church of God In Christ plays a significant role in gospel music because of its acceptance of traditional and non-traditional instruments in worship services that at one time were frowned on by Baptist and Methodist churches. These instruments included drums, washboards, tambourines, and guitars.¹⁴ The guitar was a popular instrument in male dominated quartets and also among female evangelists such as Rosetta Tharpe. Musicians who played instruments in establishments that hosted smoking, drinking, provocative dancing, gambling, and any other activity that was contrary to “righteous living” were considered taboo for sacred worship in the house of the Lord.¹⁵ An energetic sermon that called for righteous living, a convicting altar call for confession, and the telling of the goodness of God were included in celebratory worship services, although not necessarily in

¹² Ibid, XXIV-XXIX.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Jerma A. Jackson, *Singing In My Soul* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 22.

¹⁵ Ibid.

that order.¹⁶ “The Church of God In Christ incorporated a section in worship services for testimonies, in which a person would stand up and start a song and other members of the congregation would join. These songs were done in a call-and-response fashion and encouraged individuals to display their divine gift of solo singing which lies in the heart of gospel music.”¹⁷

Gospel Pioneers

This section outlines a brief history of gospel performers who relate to Johnson’s work within the Church of God in Christ. While it leaves out some major gospel performers, such as Mahalia Jackson, it does bring forward some important singers from this tradition. The Church of God In Christ played a formative role in gospel music as it produced many lesser-known gospel singers, who influenced other vocalists with a tremendous impact on singers in other denominations. For example, gospel music flourished in the National Baptist Convention as well, and some important singers included Lucie Campbell, Thomas Dorsey, Sallie Martin, Rosetta Tharpe, James Cleveland, and COGIC minister of music, Mattie Moss Clark.

While arranged spirituals gained worldwide renown, the sacred singing that inspired gospel music remained sequestered in local religious communities throughout the 1910s and early 1920s...Sanctified communities never envisioned themselves as pioneers of gospel music between 1890 and 1930. Yet they realized that their music differed from the hymns, anthems, and arranged spirituals that were in educational institutions and mainline denominations. Histories produced by the Church of God In Christ were

¹⁶ Boyer, 24.

¹⁷ Jackson, 22.

usually given in documents that showed the development of the church with scanty historical references related to music.¹⁸

Because the African Methodist Episcopal church was the first organized black establishment of Christianity, it is important to recognize some of their major musical contributions. In the book *People Get Ready*, Robert Darden writes a chapter entitled “The Fathers of Gospel: William H. Sherwood, Charles A. Tindley, and Thomas A. Dorsey.”

Charles Albert Tindley (1851-1933) was a composer and minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, who wrote hymns that focused on specific concerns of African Americans: worldly sorrows, blessings, woes, and eternal joys after death. Some of his most famous works include “When the Storms of Life Are Raging Stand by Me,” “We’ll Understand It Better By and By,” and “Take Your Burdens To The Lord, Leave Them There.”¹⁹

William Henry Sherwood was the first African Americans to publish songs that were cast in the Negro spiritual, pre-gospel style. “The melodies, harmonies, and rhythm set the stage for music that in less than thirty years would be called ‘gospel.’”²⁰ The National Baptist Convention Publishing Board contracted with Sherwood to establish *Baptist Young People’s Union National Harp of Zion*.²¹ These collections later supplied Vernard Johnson and many others with standard literature for church services and conventions. This music gave Johnson a repertoire that was recognizable to his audience, because it had been

¹⁸ Jackson, 26.

¹⁹ Robert Darden, *People Get Ready! A New History of Black Gospel Music* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc., 1973), 160. Sherwood’s birth was possibly before the Emancipation and no records are known.

²⁰ Ibid, 160.

²¹ Ibid, 160.

included in worship for a hundred years. “It was very important for me to play songs that the congregation recognized, because when they sang those words as I played the horn, there would be a personal touch or a better connection between the listener and me.”²²

Thomas A. Dorsey (1899-1993) is considered to be the “Father of Gospel Music.” Dorsey began his career as a blues pianist playing the piano in Georgia juke joints. In 1916, he joined the “Great Migration” from the rural south and headed to Chicago for a better living. In 1921, he attended the National Baptist Convention and was inspired to commit his life to gospel music, but financial woes made him continue to seek employment in clubs.²³ In 1928, upon the loss of a friend, Dorsey wrote “If You See My Savior, Tell Him That You Saw Me”; this was the pivotal point after which he would solely dedicate his life to the creation of gospel music.²⁴ Dorsey proceeded to write music and found his niche in publishing with the assistance of Sallie Martin. The two of them founded Dorsey’s publishing company that helped him to sell more than four thousand copies of his sheet music in the 1930 National Baptist Convention. Dorsey wrote songs that have remained stellar hits in the congregations to this day: “I Will Trust in the Lord,” “I’m Going To Live the Life That I Sing About In My Song,” and “Precious Lord Take My Hand.”²⁵

Sallie Martin was a Pentecostal singer from the Fire Baptized Holiness Church, and her fame was spread over several “sanctified” churches in Chicago. However, as one of the first to sing and popularize Dorsey’s songs, she gained a reputation by constructing gospel

²² Vernard Johnson, interview by Brandon McCray, 3 March, 2015.

²³ Darden, 169.

²⁴ Darden, 170.

²⁵ Darden, 170.

community choirs. While developing community choirs across the nation, Martin was successful at crossing denominational lines and her name came in the same conversation of all Dorsey's circles.²⁶

Though Martin was not considered one of the greatest gospel singers, she had a keen sense of business. She helped Dorsey to set up his publishing company and sell his sheet music in places that utilized their services. Being raised in a Pentecostal church, she did not gain an interest to learn to read music and that irritated Dorsey. The two stayed in contention, but she knew how to draw a crowd with her raspy voice. "In 1932, she helped Dorsey organize the National Convention of Gospel Choirs and Choruses (NCGCC) and where she remained vice president until her death."²⁷ "Despite her adversarial relationship with Dorsey that endured until the 1980s when Dorsey retired from composing, Martin was Dorsey's right hand in his gospel ministry. In recognition of her contributions to gospel music and her work with Dorsey, she was accorded the title of 'Mother of Gospel' by the NCGCC."²⁸ Thus she gained the title as the "Mother of Gospel Music."²⁹

Lucie Campbell (1885-1963) was appointed musical director of the National Baptist Convention, USA Inc. in 1916. "This denomination was the largest black religious organization at the time...Under her direction she organized 1000 voice choirs to sing at the annual conventions for elaborate musicales and pageants. Her best-loved songs from this era include standards such as "Something Within," "He Understands, He'll Say, 'Well

²⁶ Jackson, 59.

²⁷ Boyer, 63.

²⁸ Boyer, 64

²⁹ Boyer, 64.

Done,” “Heavenly Sunshine,” and “The King’s Highway,” all well-crafted, traditional hymns.

Campbell actively campaigned to include new music and artists in her large convention gatherings.³⁰ Her ability to put on these large concerts influenced Mattie Moss Clark, International Minister of Music for the Church of God In Christ.³¹

Mattie Moss Clark (1928-1994) was a major contributor and influence to gospel music in the sixties. She was a proficient organist, pianist, choir director, and composer of more than a hundred songs.³² Clark’s musicals brought out thousands of worshippers to enjoy the new talented gospel stars of the day.³³ Record companies, producers, and radio announcers flooded the convention in search for new talent. Some of Clark’s most treasured songs include “Climbing Up The Mountain,” “Save Hallelujah,” and “Salvation is Free” which Vernard Johnson also recorded on his first album *Saxophone for Christ*.³⁴

The importance of gospel singers appearing before audiences at the National Baptist Convention diminished after the death of Lucie Campbell (who had made the convention the most important venue for introducing new gospel singers for forty years). The principle denomination for the introduction of new gospel singers became COGIC through its Midnight Musicals at the annual convention, under the direction of Mattie Moss Clark. Some of the singers who came to prominence through these musicals include Rance Allen, The Edwin Hawkins Family (Edwin, Walter, and Tremaine), Andre Crouch, Beverly Glenn, Donald Vails, Keith Pringle, and gospel saxophonist Vernard Johnson.³⁵

³⁰ Darden, 163.

³¹ Boyer, 125

³² Boyer, 126.

³³ Boyer, 125.

³⁴ Boyer, 127.

³⁵ Boyer, 125.

Rev. James Cleveland (1931-1991) was nicknamed the “The Crown Prince of Gospel Music” and became a major influence to the industry.³⁶ In 1968, he added an extra extension to gospel music with his creation of the Gospel Music Workshop of America.³⁷ The Gospel Music Workshop of America (GMWA) is a national convention that started under the umbrella of the Savoy Record Company. GMWA has organized branches known as chapters in most of the states in the United States.³⁸ Chapter members who attend the convention are privy to every facet of gospel music from local choirs, soloists, instrumentalist, and music business. This convention aided in the spread of the gospel sound and presented stellar musical programs that heightened the awareness of black gospel music. By 1981, the Gospel Music Workshop of America would include Johnson as a star worthy of special treatment and recognition.³⁹

In addition to these performers are many other gospel pioneers whom Vernard Johnson continues to acknowledge: Mahalia Jackson, Roberta Martin, Rosetta Tharpe, Gertrude Ward, Clara Ward, Bro Joe May, Sam Cooke and The Soul Stirrers, to name a few. These giants helped Johnson create a style on his saxophone that positioned his critics to pay closer attention to his approach to gospel music.

³⁶ Darden,272.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Johnson, Interview.

Dr. Vernard Johnson's Life and Career

Dr. Vernard Johnson (b.1948) is an African American who transitioned the saxophone as a solo instrument into gospel music tradition through the black church.⁴⁰ Though Johnson is not the first to play the saxophone in church, he single-handedly blazed the trail for other instrumentalists to gain opportunities as soloists with choral accompaniment. He added the saxophone as a featured soloist to the standard five piece rhythm section of organ, piano, drums, bass and lead guitars.⁴¹ Johnson admits that he was first inspired to play the saxophone in church by the late William Watson. Watson ascended to the ecclesiastical elevation as a bishop in the Church of God In Christ, of which Johnson is also a pastor. As Watson climbed the credential ladders of the church, he did not continue to play the saxophone on an ongoing basis, but picked it up intermittently in his local church and jurisdiction for special occasions.⁴²

Johnson is the fourth of nine children born to the late Pastor Lee Harold and Mother Adlee Johnson, but he was raised by his mother's sister and her husband, Catherine and Sylvester Cofield. As a child, he had a bad case of asthma, and his mother testifies that there were nights when he kept the family up praying for divine intervention on behalf of his condition as they massaged his back in the area of the lungs. He was a sickly child and was unable to compete in sports or play with neighborhood children.⁴³ By junior high school, kids had begun teasing and telling him that he was not going to be anything.

⁴⁰ Pellecchia, 15.

⁴¹ Pellecchia, 14.

⁴² Pellecchia, 15.

⁴³ Adlee Johnson, *This is My Life...You Better Listen* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse Publishing, 2013), 40.

However, one day after listening to the band teacher of Kansas City, Kansas Argentine Junior High School present a recruitment speech for children to join the band, Johnson decided to pick out an instrument. His desire was to play the saxophone, but he needed the permission of Aunt Catherine, who he also affectionately referred to as “momma.”

“Boy you don’t have enough wind to blow a saxophone and I know you don’t have enough wind to play it, but I also know Someone who can put wind in you,” exclaimed, Aunt Catherine. So she prayed for me and the saxophone came home the next day. At 4 p.m. I would be on the porch serenading the neighbors daily. I would blow a note and gasp for air, blow another note and gasp for air, etc. I learned how to play the saxophone with asthma.⁴⁴

Johnson is also a third generation member of the Church of God In Christ, which is now the largest black Pentecostal denomination in the world.⁴⁵ As stated earlier, the Church of God In Christ also believes in divine healing and allows parishioners to give account by testimonies of miraculous encounters that have occurred through the power of believing in prayer. After prayer and scripture reading, the testimony service often began with a leader who would start a call-and-response song that would electrify the congregation. Following the song, the leader would tell of the goodness of God in a quite elaborate and sensational manner. Then another would stand up and either sing another call-and-response song or just give a solo of a song that was “burning on their hearts.” This is the type of church service to which Johnson was accustomed, and it etched in his mind how to inspire a crowd with a moving testimony along with a heartfelt rendition of his song with the saxophone.

Madden Temple Church of God In Christ, in Kansas City, Kansas, provided a safe haven for Johnson and allowed him to play his instrument along with the church services.

⁴⁴ Johnson, Interview.

⁴⁵ Boyer, 23.

The saints were very encouraging to his newly found mission and felt the necessity to encourage him with love and affection, just as they did all other musicians. However, Johnson also experienced hurt at a tender age. “A lady invited me to play my saxophone on a program at her church. When I arrived, I played a couple warm- up notes that didn’t sound so good and she acted like she did not know me or invite me. She told the church leaders that I invited myself,” Johnson recalled.⁴⁶

During his high school years, Johnson turned from playing in the church to playing in his school band and in jazz clubs in Kansas City. From 1963 to 1966, Johnson played his saxophone under the baton of music educator Leon Brady at Sumner High School in Kansas City, Kansas. At Sumner High School, Brady bartered his percussion talents with many renowned jazz musicians across the country.⁴⁷ When jazz legends came to Kansas City, they often wanted Brady to play in their stage performances. Instead of charging for his services, Brady asked the musicians to come to his school and give music clinics. These clinics gave an edge to the music program and inspired students to pursue playing blues and jazz, including Johnson.⁴⁸ As a teenager, Johnson joined a secular band called the Kansas City Jazz Prophets. The band played jazz, blues, and rock and featured Johnson as a soloist on most of the recognizable tunes of the day.

⁴⁶ Pellecchia, 14.

⁴⁷ Leon Brady, interview by Brandon McCray, 18 February, 2015.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

At the tender age of seventeen, Johnson's intrinsic familial values and religious morals learned in his upbringing, allowed him to claim the foundational convictions of his youth and to commit to leaving secular music venues to solely play in the church.⁴⁹

I couldn't feel comfortable in the clubs. There was something in my mind and heart that said, 'You need to be saved. You need Christ in your life.' Whatever I would do, that voice would follow me everywhere in my mind. Finally, someone said to me, 'If you give your life to Christ he will change your Life... He could even touch your lungs. So I decided I was going to put the horn down, because I thought it wasn't appropriate to bring it into church after I had been playing it in the clubs, jazz bands and everywhere else. But one day, in my heart, I heard God's spirit speaking to my heart, not audibly, but as He does in his quiet and sweet way, and said, 'Vernard, don't put your horn down. Just change your song.' And that is when I changed my song to 'Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.' I began to blow for Jesus, as I would put it. Every song I would blow would be for Christ, I would blow church music.⁵⁰

In the Church of God In Christ, the repertoire consisted of call-and-response singing, specific choral specials, and solos. Because there were no transcriptions or original compositions written for sacred saxophone, it was necessary for Johnson to copy the style of the vocal worship soloists of church ensembles and congregants as they participated in the fervent call-and-response singing. His wide vibrato mirrored the human voice and made the saxophone sound as if it was singing. Johnson admitted that he did listen to Motown tenor saxophonist Junior Walker, and he added Walker's approach of high notes to his personal arsenal.⁵¹ Today, Johnson still holds to his claim that Walker may have influenced him, but he didn't inspire him.

⁴⁹ Pellecchia, 14.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Johnson, Interview.

Johnson also claims that he spent a lot of time listening to Walter and Edwin Hawkins, who actually experienced criticism of gospel music in the sixties, when they arranged the standard gospel hymn "Oh Happy Day" with a disco beat.⁵² They, along with the late Andre Crouch, are considered pioneers to contemporary gospel music. They were also members of the Church of God In Christ and were often showcased at the big musical events put on by the national church conventions in Memphis, Tennessee under the direction of the International President of the Church of God In Christ music department, Mattie Moss Clark. Eventually, Clark would include Johnson in the line-up.

In the meantime, Johnson was gaining popularity in the Kansas City area. The late Elder Hubert Lambert, an Arkansas native who moved to Kansas City, was both a pastor and tent revivalist. He took an early interest in Johnson and hired him to travel during the summer times and whenever he was available. Pastor Lambert's entourage would include his drummer, organist, Johnson, and barbeque pit. An outdoor connoisseur on the grill, Lambert would have the young men to play and attract a crowd as he cooked the mouth-watering dish that could be smelled throughout the neighborhood. Lambert would put the microphone in the bell of Johnson's sax and holler through another microphone encouraging remarks such as "Call 'em Vernard, call Him." When the empty tent would fill up with passersby, Lambert would signal to Johnson "Now I got it from here," and Lambert would start to preach. This benefitted both men; Johnson was gaining notoriety from the tent travelling all over the Midwest and Lambert was able to plant churches that he would

⁵² Boyer, 5.

later pastor in neighboring states.⁵³ Simultaneously, Johnson had attracted the attention of the much more conservative Baptists preachers of Kansas City and invitations began to expand his schedule.

Dr. E.A. Freeman was the pastor of First Baptist Church in Kansas City, Kansas as well as the president of the National Baptist Congress - the Christian Education branch of the National Baptist Convention. When Freeman brought Johnson's talents to the forefront of the Baptist church, Johnson formed another significant bond with California pastor and East Texas native, Dr. Edward V. Hill. The two of them also teamed up for the next forty years: Johnson would preface Hill's sermon with a sermonic hymn of his choosing. Dr. Hill was a very prominent preacher that had influence among politicians and community activists. He was also a well-known civil rights leader. It was Dr. Hill who opened the door for Johnson to play before the legendary Billy Graham.⁵⁴ The prominent men of the Baptist church were a fraternal organization of business executives who guided the spiritual climate and business affairs of the church.

Many family members, well-wishers, friends and clergy encouraged young Johnson to continue his career by pursuing formal training in music. After Johnson received his Bachelor of Music Education degree in 1970 from Kansas State Teacher's College of Emporia, he married his bride Ms. Betty Smith, and later recorded his first independent album, *Saxophone For Christ*. This recording brought about considerable accomplishment, but it also brought pain and distress. After Johnson made the recording with meager funds

⁵³ Johnson, Interview.

⁵⁴ Rev. Lacy Kirk Curry, interview by Brandon McCray, 7 April, 2015.

that were given him in offerings and honorariums, an unscrupulous preacher promised to help him sell the album in the Baptist Convention. This preacher changed the album cover and put another person's name and picture on it and sold the album. Vernard's support team, Hill and Freeman, helped him to get the real recording to the public with the right cover. Hill wrote a letter of recommendation for him to enroll in Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas. In 1973, Johnson earned his Master of Arts degree in Church Music and a Doctor of Music Arts degree in Music Composition in 1979. These accomplishments made him the first black to graduate from this prestigious Southern Baptist (white Baptist) institution.⁵⁵

Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary (SWBTS) allowed Johnson to minister in chapel services in front of future prominent preachers who had the budget to hire him for concerts. While attending SWBTS, Johnson was also a frequent guest to Bishop College in Dallas, Texas. Bishop College was one of the Heritage black schools that housed many economically deprived students and transitioned their minds to a passageway of professionally trained models in a variety of academic fields, especially preachers. Johnson was experiencing the best of both worlds and his career was beginning to hit on all cylinders. While SWBTS placed him in the hearts of whites in their national conventions, Bishop College kept him in the forefront of black Baptists and that increased his long lists of annual appointments and engagements.⁵⁶ Rev. Dr. Lacy Kirk Curry, world-renowned clergymen of the National Baptist Convention, validated Johnson's recall of acceptance in

⁵⁵ Johnson, Interview.

⁵⁶ Johnson, Interview.

the Baptist church. Curry's cousin, Rev. Dr. Milton Curry, was the president of Bishop College and often had Johnson come and electrify chapel services.

When Vernard Johnson showed up with that saxophone at the convention by invitation of Dr. E.A. Freeman, we all wondered if this was a joke. What was he going to do and how was it going to go over on a conservative group like us. We knew that Holiness churches would let that instrument in their services but the National Baptist... Before he played, he gave this testimony of how he was healed of asthma and that got our attention. He then would have that music playing kind of low (pianissimo) as he was giving his speech. Then when he started playing something like 'Amazing Grace' he got everybody's attention with that horn sounding like it was singing. We could hear the words coming out of it. Then we started standing up and boosting him on as the sisters were getting "caught up in the spirit." After his first time playing for us, history was in the making. The leading clergy started booking him to come to their churches and our two main schools American Baptist College in Nashville would bring him to their institution and my cousin, Dr. Milton Curry, made sure he came to Bishop. After all, he was living in the neighboring city of Fort Worth, Texas. Within a few years he was an expected featured guest given an opportunity whenever our national functions met. That is the way his fame spread in the convention. At that time around thirty to fifty thousand attended the convention...we came from all over the world. Johnson had very powerful men in his corner, especially Drs. Freeman and Hill. When my brother picked him, he had all of the students who planned on being preachers and the student body. Everyone had to go to chapel and when it was mentioned he was coming, he was gladly received. In those times it felt like "rock star" pandemonium. Of course we were conservative Baptists, but some of our students were also going over to the "Holiness" churches and they brought that type of excitement back to the campus with them.⁵⁷

Johnson's tenure at SWBTS allowed him to associate with prominent preachers and powerful business executives that assisted in establishing him into a 501c3 company:

Vernard Johnson Soul Winning Concert Ministry. In this ministry, contributors known as partners gave ten dollars and received his latest album and a monthly newsletter that listed his itinerary. The newsletter also gave a brief overview of the many conversions that took place from one church or venue to another. Disc jockeys began playing Johnson's records on their radio stations and public appearances on shows such as Jerry Falwell's Old Time

⁵⁷ Curry, Interview.

Gospel Hour, PTL broadcasts hosted by Jim and Tammy Bakker, Pat Robertson's 700 Club, and Paul and Jan Crouch's TBN telecasts were other avenues that solidified his newly found career. Under his contract with Glori records the following albums were recorded: *Vernard Johnson and the Washington State Mass Choir*, *Brother Vernard Johnson Father I Stretch My Hand To Thee*, *Brother Vernard Johnson Soul Metamorphosis*, and *Brother Vernard Johnson: I Love To Praise His Name*. These recordings were not only available in record stores, but also after concerts and appearances. This also aided the ministerial finances.⁵⁸

There were some thorns along the way. Johnson recalls being on tour with the SWBTS choir when some churches' administrations threatened to not let the choirs sing if he was with them because he was African American. The choral director would convince them to let him play one song. Usually after they allowed, they would ask him to join them again. Johnson claims that this experience, though painful, put him in the hearts of the Southern Baptists, which reported being the largest Protestant reformation in the land. Now he had gained popularity in the National Baptist Convention and Southern Baptist Convention, even though he was a member of the Church of God In Christ.

When members of the Church of God In Christ saw their member being featured in other organizations, publications, and telecasts, they quickly started utilizing Johnson's talents and showcasing him on the main stages of their conventions. Dr. Mattie Moss Clark, national minister of music for the Church of God In Christ, included Johnson on her Friday night musicals, which generated thousands of attendees including record company representatives, radio broadcasters, and corporate executives. When Johnson's listening

⁵⁸ Johnson, Interview.

audience expanded, Savoy Record Company signed him to their record company. Savoy produced *The Best of Vernard Johnson* in 1978 and *Vernard Live: I Am a Witness Too in 1981*. The Savoy record label was home for most of the mainstream black gospel artists at that time. The gospel branch of the business featured Rev. James Cleveland, who was the founder of the Gospel Music Workshop of America (GMWA). GMWA is a national convention made up of gospel artists that are members of local chapters in their cities. On *Vernard Live: I'm a Witness Too*, Johnson's rendition of "Jesus, That's My King" was included on the annual compilation album.

The eighties brought more collectible albums with Savoy and also ushered Johnson to other musical venues that were not gospel. Dr. Johnson represented gospel music in jazz festivals in Switzerland (1984), Germany (1988), and Canada.⁵⁹ In 1991, Johnson signed a contract to record his first compact disc entitled *I'm Alive* with Elektra Records, which is a branch of Warner Brothers. This recording was his first on a predominantly secular label, but its purpose was to put him on more jazz stages representing gospel music. The nineties also saw him make his first professional video recording in a packed sanctuary at Travis Avenue Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Texas, and when re-mastered, an added highlight was his rendition of *Amazing Grace* performed for President William Jefferson Clinton. President Clinton was a special guest of Presiding Bishop Louis H. Ford in the 1993 Holy Convocation.⁶⁰ Bishop Ford invited the President in honor of celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King's last speech, which was delivered at Mason Temple.

⁵⁹ Johnson, Interview.

⁶⁰ Michael Kelley, "Nation must confront its 'crisis of the spirit,' President tells COGIC," *Commercial Appeal*, Memphis, Tennessee, November 14, 1993, A 15.

Mason Temple is the Church of God In Christ headquarters named after its founder Bishop Charles Mason. Johnson recalled “Bishop Ford told the President, who was also his personal friend, ‘I hear that you like the saxophone... Well the Church of God In Christ has the best in the world and I want him to play for you. Come here Dr. Vernard Johnson and bless us.’ I came to the platform and played Amazing Grace before President Clinton and the congregation.”⁶¹ However, President Clinton was not the first president that Johnson had the privilege of meeting; he also played before Presidents James Carter, Ronald Reagan, George H. Bush, and George W. Bush.⁶² Dr. Johnson took his “Soul Winning Concert Ministry” to different places around the globe including Africa, South Korea, El Salvador, France, Canada, Switzerland, Germany, India and many more. The ministry also sponsored forty-six concerts in arenas and stadiums in the United States. These concerts allowed for Johnson to gain more popularity and notoriety, because he had local pastors and prominent businessmen give financial assistance for underwritten concerts. These venues followed the Billy Graham crusade format, with the emphasis being placed on the altar calls. Johnson claims to have led over four hundred thousand people to make personal decisions for Christ.⁶³ In 1996, Johnson utilized his compositional skills when he became the International Orchestra Conductor for the Church of God In Christ. He arranged, orchestrated, and conducted the orchestra that attracted a diverse group of musicians throughout the country, who may not have had the opportunity to perform in the conventional meetings. He usually orchestrated the most popular gospel songs that were featured on radio stations

⁶¹ Johnson, Interview.

⁶² Pellochia, 15.

⁶³ Johnson, Interview.

in urban communities. If he had not written out the music there would not have been a musical library. Johnson arranged and orchestrated over one hundred songs in his nine-year tenure that ended in 2005. In 1997, Johnson became an ordained minister in the Church of God In Christ.

Johnson's Style

Johnson's style of gospel music has often been compared to rhythm and blues, but he doesn't want anyone to limit his renditions to a secular analysis. He indeed feels that it is necessary to include his spiritual enlightenments along with any explanation of his God-given ability.

As for how our music compares with rhythm and blues, ours is from a religious background that has a deliverance to it. We have been through trials and tribulations, and that is what the world's is also based on...trials and tribulations- but ours is not only that, it's a type of deliverance. In my style I would listen to the gospel pioneers, locally-talented singers that were not on a record, and I would imitate them. So I would listen to the human voice and try to make my saxophone sound as close to that voice as possible.⁶⁴

Most gospel music comes from the blues, including its musical structure, content, and meaning. As Rick Stitzel suggests in his book *Jazz Theory: A Survival Guide*:

The blues have been a part of history since its beginning. Each era of history, regardless of stylistic changes, has incorporated the blues chord progression and the blues scale. To many, the term "blues" implies a certain emotional feeling, one of sadness. To jazz and blues musicians, the term implies both happiness and sadness...Throughout history, the blues have been used as a vehicle for expression and improvisation through various alterations.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Pellechia, 15.

⁶⁵ Rick Stitzel, *Jazz Theory A Survival Guide* (Arlington, TX: Rick Stitzel Music, 2002), 141.

Just as blues has been an emotional vehicle for expression in secular music, gospel blues has served the same purpose in African American churches. The propelling engines have been energized with progressions built on I, IV, and V chords.⁶⁶ Furthermore, “musicians have experimented with varying lengths outside of the standard 12-bar form, with the addition of 16-bar and 8-bar lengths. Other chords have also been added to create opportunity for greater harmonic and melodic expression.”⁶⁷

Traditionally, the blues is a twelve-bar progression that repeats over and over, allowing a soloist to play several choruses. One of the unique and distinguishing features of early blues is that all of the chords were dominant in quality. Since then, many variations have been derived from the early blues form. Musicians have experimented with varying lengths, creating sixteen-bar, eight-bar, and a number of other non – twelve-bar lengths. They have also added many other chords to the blues, creating an opportunity for greater harmonic and melodic expression. Variations in harmonic content have led to major blues, wherein the I chord and IV chords retain their diatonic qualities.⁶⁸

The main challenge facing Johnson, as he sought to perform gospel music as a form of preaching or testimony, involved adapting the vocally-directed gospel model for his instrument. To successfully insert the non-verbal saxophone into this musical context, Johnson adopted at least three performance elements: song introduction, vocal conventions that are transformed on his saxophone, and crowd interaction. The following examples will examine each convention in turn.

⁶⁶ Stitzel, 142.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

Lyrics for “Jesus That’s My King”

Table 1

Chorus:

Jesus when troubles burden me down
Jesus I know your Love’s all around,
Jesus oh, oh, oh that’s my King (2x)

Verse:

When darkness gathers
And friends forsake me
I know you’ll never
Let Me Down
I Know your answer
Will ever betide me
You’re just a jewel
That I have found
Jesus your name the sweetest I know
Jesus I’ll tell it wherever I go
Jesus, oh, oh, oh, that’s my King.

“Jesus That’s My King” highlights the blurry line between gospel and blues. When Johnson first recorded his album *Vernard Live, I’m A Witness Too* in 1981, his rendition of “Jesus That’s My King” caught the attention of the Savoy Recording executives, who included it on James Cleveland’s 1981 compilation album *Noways Tired*. This album featured some of the most powerful influences in gospel music in 1981. Johnson prefaced his recording of this song by saying “I want to go back and get an old number that kinda sound like the blues, because it talks about troubles. It says Jesus (introduction of music starts) when troubles burden me down, Jesus I know your love is all around; that’s my King.

Let me see your hands if he is your King tonight.”⁶⁹ Just as the standard blues uses I and IV chord progressions, so do many gospel tunes, including this classic eight-bar example.



Figure 1 Eight-bar example of traditional blues chord progression.

One important element of Johnson’s adaptation of vocal gospel styles for saxophone involves the instrument’s ability to imitate the voice. In his recording and performances of “Jesus, That’s My King” one may notice that Johnson rarely improvises, instead he stays as close to the vocal line as it would be sung by a gospel soloist. So he uses pitch bending, throat humming, growling, and extreme dynamics to stress his point of emotion in the music. These conclusions have been drawn by listening to the album *Vernard Live, I’m A Witness Too (1981)* and *I’m Alive (compact disc 1991)* with Johnson.

After a descending combination of the blues scale notes in the introduction, Johnson opens the song in B-flat, using the blues scale’s first 5 pitches (B-flat, D-flat, E-flat, E-natural, F) in the first A section. This section is divided into two two-bar phrases, the first harmonized by the I chord and the second harmonized by the IV chord. Johnson describes the chorus in this way:

⁶⁹ Johnson, Interview.

In measure 5, ‘the sad blues’ known as the antecedent is stated with the words ‘Jesus when troubles burden me down, Jesus I know your love’s all around.’ This trouble can be felt by the D-flat in the opening phrase, but hope appears in measure 9 with the call of the name Jesus. The listener is alerted by the changing of the sad D -flat becoming naturalized at the beginning of measure 9. Measure 10 places affection for the Burden Bearer on beats one to eight by using the word ‘oh.’ ‘That’s my king’ is stated on beats ten, eleven, and twelve.⁷⁰



Figure 2 Antecedent and Consequent of “Jesus That’s My King”

Johnson restates the A section with slight ornamentation and then introduces the verse (B section) with little-to-no improvisation. The B section starts at m. 13, and the lyrics introduce another emotional problem that is continued in m. 14: “when darkness gathers and friends forsake me.” However the gospel consequent offers good news and hope from mm. 15 – 28, with the lyrics: “I know you’ll never let me down, I know your answer will ever betide me You’re just a jewel that I’ve found.”

⁷⁰ Johnson, Interview.

Verse A

Musical score for Verse A of "Jesus That's My King". The score is written in treble clef with a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat) and a 4/4 time signature. It consists of three staves of music. The first staff starts at measure 13 and ends at measure 16. The second staff starts at measure 17 and ends at measure 20. The third staff starts at measure 21 and ends at measure 24. Chord symbols are written above the notes in red: E^b7, B^b7, F⁻, B^b7, E^b7, E^b7, C7, F⁻, B^b7, E^b, B^b, B^b, E^b.

Figure 3 B section of "Jesus That's My King"

2 Jesus That's My King

Musical score for the Coda of "Jesus That's My King". The score is written in treble clef with a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat) and a 4/4 time signature. It consists of four staves of music. The first staff starts at measure 25 and ends at measure 28. The second staff starts at measure 29 and ends at measure 33. The third staff starts at measure 34 and ends at measure 37. The fourth staff starts at measure 38 and ends at measure 40. Chord symbols are written above the notes in red: B^b/F, A^b7, G+7, C7(b9), E^b7, B^b, B^b7, F7, B^b, B^b7, E^b7, B^b7/F, A^b7, G+7, C7(b9), F+7, B^b, E^b7, B^b7, F+7, B^b, B^b7, E^b7, B^b7/F, A^b7, G+7, C7(b9), F+7, B^b. Performance markings include "1.", "2.", "rit.", "On cue", "8^{va}", "loco", and "rit.".

Figure 4 Coda of "Jesus That's My King"

MM. 25-26 resemble mm. 9 -10 and mm. 15-16, because they call the name and describe the Problem Solver, Jesus. MM 29-5 could be considered the B section that repeats in m36 (closing section). When playing in concert Bb there is usually a highlighted Dr. Vernard Johnson salutation. It repeats previous material in the coda and highlights a fifth-note-scale degree and fourth octave altissimo concert "F" squealed note for energy and crowd response. Hence, this is Johnson's personal signature.

There is not much need for the show of technique and fancy things that calls for unnecessary personal attention, because the focus should not be for the lifting up of one's self, but should point to the One who can lift anyone from their lowest state to a positive outlook on life. This is the message that I try to convey to the audience in all of my music. It is just easier with this composition, because there is a secular reference of blues that can be used when reviewing experiences that happen in life. So the gospel blues can be a source of encouragement and witness to the heart of those who are troubled.... Everything is going to be alright.⁷¹

⁷¹ Johnson, Interview.

Lead Sheet for "Jesus That's My King"

Jesus That's My King

Traditional Gospel
Arranged by
Brandon McCray

Slow Gospel

The musical score is written in the key of B-flat major (two flats) and 4/4 time. It consists of six staves of music. The first staff (measures 1-4) features a simple piano accompaniment with chords: Bb/F, Ab7, G+7, C7(b9), F+7, Bb7, Eb7, Bb, and F+7. The second staff (measures 5-8) has chords: Bb7, Eb7, Bb7, and Eb7. The third staff (measures 9-12) has chords: Bb7/F, Ab7, G+7, C7(b9), F+7, Bb7, Eb7, Bb7, and F7. The fourth staff (measures 13-16) is labeled "Verse A" and has chords: Eb7, Bb7, F-, and Bb7. The fifth staff (measures 17-20) has chords: Eb7, Eb7, C7, and F-. The sixth staff (measures 21-24) has chords: Bb7, Eb, Bb, and Eb. The piano accompaniment includes various rhythmic patterns, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests.

2

Jesus That's My King

The lead sheet consists of four staves of music in a 3/4 time signature, with a key signature of one flat (Bb). The first staff (measures 25-28) is marked with a first ending bracket and contains the following chord symbols: Bb/F, Ab7, G+7, C7(b9), Eb7, Bb, Bb7, and F7. The second staff (measures 29-33) is marked with a second ending bracket and contains: Bb, Bb7, Eb7, Bb7/F, Ab7, G+7, C7(b9), F+7, Bb, and Eb7. The third staff (measures 34-38) contains: Bb7, F+7, Bb, Bb7, Eb7, Bb7/F, Ab7, and G+7. The fourth staff (measures 39-42) contains: C7(b9), F+7, and Bb. Performance markings include *rit.* at the end of the second staff, *8va* at the start of the fourth staff, *loco* under the second measure of the fourth staff, and *rit.* under the final measure of the fourth staff. The instruction "On cue" is written below the first measure of the third staff.

Figure 5 Lead Sheet of "Jesus That's My King"

As Johnson played “Precious Lord, Take My Hand” on his first album, he set a tone and tenor that has lasted over the last forty years. His approach to any hymn is to carefully play the first verse and chorus without much improvisation. He contends that his listener must be able to recognize the song as a soothing reminder of the words. In the second chorus, though, he transitions from a smooth musician to the sounds of a “whooping” preacher. In the whoop, the preacher exclaims his position in an exclamatory singing manner that is followed by a progression of chords that produce motivation for the audience to “rejoice.” This manner is known as “backing the preacher.”⁷² As Johnson sways his audience, he moves from the middle register to a higher one and improvisatorially positions his sound in the heart of the listener.⁷³ Johnson often hypnotizes his audience with a spontaneously inserted riff that serves as a bridge to most of his musical phrases that are in a song with slow or rubato tempo – scale degree 3-2-1-6-5-6-1-2-3. This is done in a descending to ascending order and builds intensity that sets the mark for his next episode in the composition.

“Precious Lord, Take My Hand” is a celebrated hymn in most African American churches and is the most popular composition written by Thomas Dorsey⁷⁴ It has been translated into more than forty languages and has also been used as a prayer.⁷⁵ This song was written in 1932 out of the pain that Dorsey suffered through the loss of his wife and child.⁷⁶ In his

⁷² Therese Smith, *Let the Church Sing* (Rochester, NY: The University of Rochester Press, 2004), 188.

⁷³ Johnson, Interview.

⁷⁴ Boyer, 61.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

interpretation, Johnson not only uses the vocal conventions of bending pitches, but also other qualities unique to the saxophone. Saxophonist Vince Gnojek stated, and Johnson agreed, that:

The saxophone has a wide range of possibilities for expression that could be challenging for vocalists. It can scoop into notes in the high register without getting hoarse, it has a wider range of dynamics, and it can produce sounds like flutter tongue and growls. The dynamic range can go from a pianissimo and crescendo to a triple forte. That doesn't mean that a vocalist can't, it is just done so much with the saxophone because of its wide range of possibilities. These are some things done on the saxophone that are particularly performed in jazz, but also done in gospel music.⁷⁷

So Johnson gives a mournful rendition of this gospel classic, with a rubato tempo that he contends must be played "eulogistically."⁷⁸

Lyrics to "Precious Lord, Take My Hand"

Precious Lord, take my hand, Lead me on let me stand, I am tiered, I am weak, I am worn: Through the storm, through the night Lead me on to the light, Take My hand, precious Lord, lead me on. ⁷⁹
--

Table 2

Though "Precious Lord" is written after a life-changing tragedy, it reminds the listener of hope in its closing. Dorsey (and Johnson) believed that songs in the church should always point to the salvation of one's condition, regardless of the painful circumstances.

⁷⁷ Vincent Gnojek, interview by Brandon McCray, 28 April 2015.

⁷⁸ Johnson, Interview.

⁷⁹ Boyer, 62.

The struggles, personal difficulties, and mishaps should be left in the music.⁸⁰ Johnson affirms his signature on these hymns just as he does with most of his endings on his recordings by playing his altissimo fifth scale degree squeal of the home key.

Precious Lord

Words and Music by
Thomas Dorsey
Arranged by
Brandon McCray

Slow Gospel ♩ = 60

Figure 6 Opening Phrase of “Precious Lord, Take My Hand”

“Precious Lord,” like most of the other interpretations of any hymn performed in African American churches, has a similar pattern of standard blues that exists with tonic and subdominant chord progressions. In the opening four bars the Bb tonic presence is presented in m. 1, but in m.2 the flatted seventh can be thought of as a V/IV which ushers the ear to the IV in m.3. M.4 presents a #IV diminished chord, which implies a II7 chord without the root.

This continuation propels to the common ground of the needed pedaled dominant that forwards into m.5 with a deceptive vi chord in m.6- the relative minor of the tonic chord. Now it looks as if the eight-bar phrase has a II, V, I progression, but it really doesn't.

⁸⁰ Michael W. Harris, *The Rise of Gospel Blues* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1992), 239.

In m.8, the dominant presents the half cadence in the first two beats.

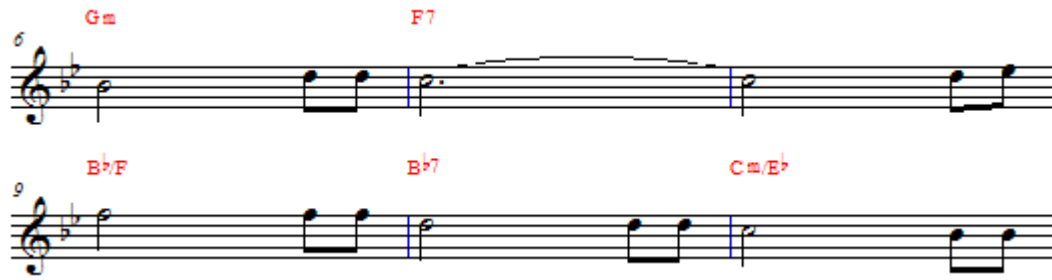


Figure 7 B section of “Precious Lord, Take My Hand”

Beat 3 connects the beginning of m.9, which melodically and harmonically mirrors the beginning in an octave above the opening of the song introduction. This presents the B section with a pedaled fifth in the tonic and proceeds to a flattened seventh in root position at m.10. This could be interpreted as a resolve to a slight modulation to the fourth degree of Eb in m.11, but the “C” minor in the right hand makes better choice as a ii chord.

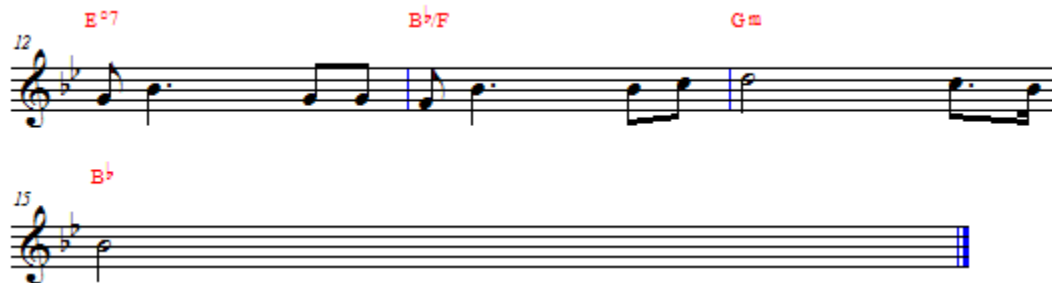


Figure 8 Coda of “Precious Lord, Take My Hand”

This allows the diminished “E” chord of m.12 to reflect m.4. M.13 resembles m.5 and sets for a climatic interlude as found in m.14, which gives closure in measure 15.

Precious Lord

Words and Music by
Thomas Dorsey
Arranged by
Brandon McCray

Slow Gospel ♩ = 60

3 E^{\flat} $E^{\flat}7$ B^{\flat}/F

6 Gm $F7$

9 B^{\flat}/F $B^{\flat}7$ Cm/E^{\flat}

12 $E^{\flat}7$ B^{\flat}/F Gm

15 B^{\flat}

Figure 9 “Precious Lord, Take My Hand” Lead Sheet

Obvious reasons of maturation indicate that Johnson’s approach to this song is much different than that of forty-five years when he recorded it. However, he contends that though his approach may have changed, the heartfelt message of the composition remained the same.⁸¹

⁸¹ Johnson, Interview.

Slowly but surely, Johnson's ministry has focused more on his preaching and less on his saxophone. However, that does not at all insinuate that he abandoned the instrument, but it does mean that he expanded his ministerial horizons. The turn of the century saw many changes to Dr. Vernard Johnson. After thirty-five years in Fort Worth, Texas, Johnson moved his family back to Kansas City, Kansas and started a church in 2005. He is the proud pastor of Amazing Grace Family Worship Center Church of God In Christ. In 2008, he became the first instrumental musician to be inducted into the Gospel Music Hall of Fame; the author of this document proudly led this quest. He enrolled in the Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Missouri for a second doctoral candidacy in Expository Preaching. Johnson has authored a book entitled *1000 Days of Fasting* and recorded a new independent compact disc entitled *The Best of Vernard, Volume 1*⁸²

⁸² Johnson, Interview.

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