

## **Black music from Scotland? It could be the gospel truth**

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THE church elder's reaction was one of utter disbelief. Shaking his head emphatically, he couldn't take in what the distinguished professor from Yale University was telling him.

"No," insisted Jim McRae, an elder of the small congregation of Clearwater in Florida. "This way of worshipping comes from our slave past. It grew out of the slave experience, when we came from Africa."

But Willie Ruff, an Afro-American professor of music at Yale, was adamant - he had traced the origins of gospel music to Scotland.

The distinctive psalm singing had not been brought to America's Deep South by African slaves but by Scottish émigrés who worked as their masters and overseers, according to his painstaking research.

Ruff, 71, a renowned jazz musician who played with Duke Ellington and Dizzy Gillespie, is convinced the Florida congregation's method of praise - called 'presenting the line', in which the psalms are called out and the congregation sings a response - came from the Hebrides.

Ruff explained: "They had always assumed that this form of worship had come from Africa, and why not?"

"I said to him I had found evidence that it was Scottish people who brought this to the New World, but he just would not believe it. I asked him what his name was. He said McRae, and I just replied: 'There you go'."

Psalm singing and gospel music are the backbone of the black Church in the United States, with gospel music CD sales alone worth half a billion dollars last year. Ruff's research has massive cultural implications for Afro-Americans and alters the history of American culture.

He said: "We as black Americans have lived under a misconception. Our cultural roots are more Afro-Gaelic than Afro-American. Just look at the Harlem phone book, it's more like the book for North Uist.

"We got our names from the slave masters, we got our religion from the slave masters and we got our blood from the slave masters.

"None of the black people in the United States are pure African. My own great great grandparents were slaves in Alabama. My grandmother's maiden name was Robertson.

"I have been to Africa many times in search of my cultural identity, but it was in the Highlands that I found the cultural roots of black America.

"I hope to inform the perception of Afro-Americans, and what a gift that is, to give people something to go on.

One of the great tragedies of the Afro-American experience is that few can trace their families beyond the bill of sale. After that it's vague: the name of a ship and never the port of embarkation. The watery highway that those ships took leave no trace."

Ruff added: "There are probably more descendents of the Highlands in the United States than there are in Scotland. There are a huge amount of Afro-Americans with light skin or red hair like Malcolm X. What were his origins?"

"Storytelling and music are some of the best ways to document the true integration and movement of people, because the music can't lie."

Ruff's journey of discovery started as a child in his home Baptist church in Alabama, when he would listen to elders present the line, which predates, and was an influence on, gospel music.

"I remember this captured my imagination as a small child. The elders, some born into slavery, say the lines in unison. They were dirge-like, impassioned melodies. They were illiterate and poor, they had

nothing, but they had that passion in their singing. I, like everyone else, assumed it was unique to black congregations in the United States, having grown out of slavery."

But last year, during a casual visit to the Presbyterian church in Cumberland, Alabama, Ruff stumbled on a predominantly black congregation that sang the same way as the Baptist congregation of his childhood.

"Not only were they singing the same psalms, they were singing in the same deeply profound way, with the same passion which cries out. The tears began to flow."

They believed the method of worship came from Africa, but Ruff started to ask whether white Presbyterian congregations sang in the same way.

The academic began researching at the Sterling Library at Yale, one of the world's greatest collections of books and papers. He found records detailing how Highlanders had settled in North Carolina in the 1700s. I found evidence of slaves in North Carolina who could speak only Gaelic. I also heard the story of how a group of Hebrideans, on landing at Cape Fear, heard a Gaelic voice in the dialect of their village. When they rounded the corner they saw a black man speaking the language and assumed they too would turn that colour because of the sun. When I made these connections, I thought: 'That's it, I'm going to the Hebrides.'

A chance meeting with James Craig, a piper with the Royal Scots, put Ruff in touch with congregations in Lewis and Donald Morrison, a leader of singing.

"When I finally met Donald, we sat down and I played him music. It was like a wonderful blind test. First I played him some psalms by white congregations, and then by a black one. He then leapt to his feet and shouted: 'That's us!'

"When I heard Donald and his congregation sing in Stornoway I was in no doubt there was a connection."

Yesterday, Jamie Reid-Baxter, a history research fellow at Glasgow University and a psalm expert, said: "This sounds extremely plausible because of the link to the Scottish slave-owners, who would definitely have brought that style of singing with them.

"The slaves would have heard the Scots singing like that, and both these forms of music are a way of expressing religious ecstasy. It's an intriguing idea."

Warwick Edwards, a reader in the music department of Glasgow University, added: "Psalm singing from the Western Isles is certainly known in America. Whether you can link that up with gospel music is another matter. It's new to me.

"One should never underestimate the longevity of these deep-down traditions. They cross oceans and people should be encouraged to investigate this further."

Ruff's research on the integration of Highland culture into black America expands conventional wisdom on Scotland's legacy in the southern states of America.

Although the Enlightenment, especially Francis Hutcheson's *A System of Moral Philosophy*, inspired the abolitionists in both Britain and America, Scotland's darker role in the slave trade is also well known. Scots were influential in founding the Ku Klux Klan, including the traditional Scottish symbol of the burning cross and the KKK's oath ceremony, which originated from a Highland custom.

Ruff said: "There will be Scots who are uncomfortable with the relationship and the involvement in the slave trade. But the Scots are like anyone, and there were many who were abolitionists and who set up schools for black children after emancipation."

While Ruff's claim has been welcomed in Scotland, it has been met with a far less favourable response in his native country.

Bobby Jones, producer of the weekly Gospel Explosion television programme which reaches more than four million viewers in the United States, is not swayed by Ruff's argument. "Gospel music is black

music," he insists.

Ruff's next mission is to return to Scotland to document and record the congregations of Lewis.

"I'll be there later this year and hope to record them there and also make recordings of American congregations. In another 100 years I doubt this form of worship will still be around. It's sad to say that on both sides of the Atlantic this is dying out.

"In the Hebrides there are few young people in the churches and this is also the case in the States. In a sense, I aim to preserve a legacy."

The lasting legacy of Ruff's research is an anthropological revelation which forces the re-evaluation of the history of two peoples. Now Afro-Americans, frustrated in their search for antecedence in their African line, might turn to their Scottish roots. As Ruff said: "Why did they leave this to a musician? This is the job of an anthropologist."