The Pentatonic Foundation: African Musical Heritage in American Gospel Vocal Traditions

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Abstract- ***This article examines how African pentatonic traditions have served as a foundational influence on the evolution, stylistic expression, and cultural significance of American gospel vocalization. Drawing on historical archives, musicological analyses, and case studies of iconic artists and ensembles, the study demonstrates how pentatonic frameworks function as both a vehicle of cultural continuity and a platform for innovation within African American sacred music. From the early institutionalization of spirituals by the Fisk Jubilee Singers to Mahalia Jackson's improvisatory artistry and Kirk Franklin's hybridization of gospel with contemporary popular forms, the persistence of pentatonic contours reveals gospel as a living archive of diasporic heritage. Methodologically, the study integrates textual analysis of archival transcriptions, close listening to recorded performances, and critical engagement with contemporary scholarship in musicology, cultural studies, and African diaspora research. This interdisciplinary approach examines how gospel music retains core African-derived tonal and participatory logics, including call-and-response, modal accessibility, and improvisatory flexibility, while simultaneously adapting to shifting performance contexts, technological advancements, and commercialization. The findings reveal that gospel music functions as a profound cultural and spiritual practice, actively shaping identity, fostering resistance, and nurturing communal expression beyond its role as a musical genre. Gospel reflects a living thread of diasporic history and creativity, where African pentatonic traditions echo through its melodies, linking it to blues, jazz, and R&B, and revealing the deep cultural imprint of African musical heritage on American life. The study contributes to scholarship by positioning gospel as both a sacred tradition and a site of aesthetic transformation, demonstrating the enduring vitality of African tonal systems in shaping the spiritual and cultural part of the United States.***

Keywords- ***Gospel Music, African Pentatonic Traditions, African Diaspora, Vocal Aesthetics, Cultural Continuity, Improvisation, Spirituals, Mahalia Jackson, Kirk Franklin, Musicology***

I. INTRODUCTION

Gospel music has long been a powerful force in American culture, shaping spiritual expression and influencing the broader narrative of national identity. Its deep roots in community and faith continue to reflect, making it both a genre and a cultural touchstone across generations. From the early twentieth century, gospel choirs and soloists contributed to American religious and social life, producing a sound that echoes far beyond the sanctuary. Gospel music, rooted in African American congregations where it serves as a primary liturgical form, remains one of the most vibrant community-based musical traditions in the U.S., blending diverse ethnic and religious influences while being largely shaped by Black American artistry (Prayer Pray, 2023; Harrison, Sr, 2024; MasterClass, 2021). Its visibility in public spaces, from national celebrations to Grammy Award stages, with its significant as both a sacred and cultural idiom. In the first half of 2024, contemporary Christian music (CCM)/gospel ranked among the top five fastest-growing genres, with overall consumption rising 8.9%, more than double the industry's 3.9% growth in 2023. On Spotify, the genre surged 30% in the U.S. and globally over the past year, and has grown 50% stateside and 60% worldwide over the last five years (Gospel Music Association, 2024). Yet, despite its prominence, the deeper structural influences that anchor gospel in African musical heritage remain underexamined in mainstream musicological discourse.

The problem lies in the limited scholarly attention to the pentatonic foundation that undergirds gospel vocalization. While the pentatonic scale, a five-note tonal system (Fornari, 2024), is widely recognized in African music across West and Central regions, its transference into the African American sacred soundscape has not been adequately foregrounded. Existing studies often emphasize socio-religious contexts of gospel music in spiritual warfare and communal liberation (Sakhiseni, 2025) or its twenty-first-century commercialization (Jegede, 2025), but fewer have rigorously traced how African tonal and vocal practices, particularly the pentatonic mode, continue to inform gospel's melodic contour, improvisational character, and harmonic flexibility. This oversight creates a gap in understanding gospel not simply as an American innovation but as an

enduring diasporic expression of African musical thought.

The significance of this study extends across multiple fields. For musicology and ethnomusicology, a close analysis of gospel's pentatonic heritage illuminates how African tonal systems were preserved and reimagined in diasporic contexts. For African diaspora studies, it demonstrates how cultural survivals from the Middle Passage remain embedded in contemporary Black expressive practices. For performance practice, it offers a framework for understanding the technical and aesthetic choices of gospel vocalists, including improvisation, call-and-response, and tonal flexibility. Also, situating gospel within its African pentatonic foundation advances current debates about cultural continuity, hybridity, and the politics of recognition in diasporic music traditions.

The paper highlights a literature review that explores scholarship on gospel and African musical traditions, highlighting key gaps in current research. Another section that defines the concept of the pentatonic scale and its African origins, followed by an analysis of how these tonal frameworks shaped the emergence of gospel music in the United States. Subsequent sections analyze the role of call-and-response, improvisation, and tonal flexibility, drawing on prominent case studies in gospel choirs and artists. The article's conclusion situates the findings within broader discussions of African diaspora cultural heritage and outlines directions for further research.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Historical and cultural context

Scholars of African music consistently emphasize that pentatonic tonal frameworks are deeply embedded in West and Central African musical systems, functioning as structural paradigms rather than isolated curiosities. Nketia's foundational work established that five-note collections and related subset scales organize both vocal and instrumental repertoires, shaping melodic contour, phrasing, and communal performance practices across ethnolinguistic areas (Nketia, 1974). Building on this legacy, recent studies reinforce the structural importance of pentatonic logic. Adom et al. (2022) highlight how oral traditions such as proverbs reflect aesthetic strategies of variation and renewal, echoing Nketia's concern for avoiding formulaic repetition. Similarly, Walls et al. (2024), through pitch-extraction and statistical modeling of traditional Ghanaian seperewa songs, demonstrate the habitual use of pentatonic and pentatonic-subset clusters, as well as flexible, non-tempered pitch practices that resist Western equal temperament. These findings underscore that pentatonic tonalities are not vestiges of antiquity but living, adaptive frameworks embedded within African performance practice.

Ethnomusicological scholarship further demonstrates how these tonal and performative predispositions traveled with enslaved Africans and were recontextualized under plantation conditions. DjeDje (2024) argues that while forced displacement fragmented specific repertoires, core aesthetic features, repetitive melodic cells, pentatonic contours, responsorial formats, and vocal timbral expressivity, endured as resilient cultural logics. Transmission did not depend on verbatim replication but on the preservation of principles that informed emergent vernacular forms in the Americas. Christensen (2024), in tracing the career of Iddrisu from Ghanaian village circles to the Dema Dance Ensemble in Oregon, illustrates how observation, experimentation, and communal performance remain central to African musical pedagogy, an ethos that resonates with the participatory modes of early African American spirituals.

Classic and contemporary studies converge in identifying spirituals as the intermediary genre linking African tonal practices to gospel. Computational and musicological analyses confirm that many spiritual melodies align closely with small-note, melody-dominant systems, frequently incorporating pentatonic collections (McBride et al., 2024; Franke, 2025). Musicologists and historians have long noted that spirituals favor pentatonic variants, responsorial textures, and heterophonic layering, which made them adaptable as both work songs and sacred idioms. Jensen (2024), drawing on slave narratives and early lyrics, emphasizes how spirituals articulated religious identity while anticipating thematic continuities with the blues. Hunter (2023) shifts focus to the ring-shout, emphasizing its embodied and participatory nature as a vehicle for memory, spirituality, and communal identity beyond the confines of European hymnody. Together, these studies show that spirituals were complex hybrid forms, blending African participatory performance traditions with Christian

imagery and hymn-based structures, rather than simply adapting existing Christian repertoire.

Focused ethnographies and archival research highlight the moments in which these melodic practices crystallized into gospel idioms. Ayorinde and Ajose (2022) examine gospel musicians' negotiation of spirituality not only through sound but also through their social lives and self-fashioning as public figures. Burnim and Maultsby situate gospel's growth within broader historical and institutional contexts, most notably the Great Migration, the urban Black church, and the commercial recording industry, demonstrating how structural changes shaped expressive practice. At the performance level, Shelley (2025) shows how gospel musicians such as Twinkie Clark and Derrick Jackson use pentatonic scalar gestures and timbral inflections to amplify improvisatory freedom and emotive intensity. Such studies show that the gospel's sonic features are structurally grounded in African traditions and shaped through the legacy of spirituals.

Institutional archives further affirm this continuity thesis. The Library of Congress collection African American Spirituals documents, through field recordings and eyewitness accounts, how pentatonic idioms, valued for their adaptability and expressive range, empowered enslaved and later African American communities to sustain ancestral tonal traditions in new cultural and religious contexts. These preserved traces demonstrate how African melodic logics survived, transformed, and ultimately laid the foundation for gospel music as a distinctly African American sacred form.

III. THE PENTATONIC SCALE IN AFRICAN MUSICAL HERITAGE

The pentatonic scale occupies a significant place in African musical heritage, serving both as a tonal framework and as a flexible system for improvisation. Retta et al. (2022) present the EMIR dataset of Ethiopian music, encompassing Orthodox Tewahedo chants, Azmari songs, and modern secular pieces, and demonstrate that each aligns with distinct Kinit modes built on pentatonic scales, underscoring the centrality of pentatonic structures across Ethiopia's sacred and secular musical traditions. Unlike the diatonic system of Western classical music, the five-tone collection avoids semitone clashes, enabling performers to create fluid melodic lines without dissonant friction. This structural quality allows singers and instrumentalists to emphasize melodic contour and rhythmic propulsion rather than harmonic progression. Ezenibe and Nwankpa (2025) reinforce this view, showing that pentatonicism functions as a unifying melodic framework across African regions. Their analysis highlights the prominence of anhemitonic scales, lacking semitones and constructed from whole-tone and minor third intervals, as the scaffolding for melodic invention in both major and minor variants, each comprising five notes drawn from the diatonic collection. Notably, since the diatonic system forms dissonant tritones on the fourth and seventh degrees, their removal produces the pentatonic form.

Recent computational analyses reaffirm this perspective. Walls et al. (2024), in their study of Ghanaian seperewa performance, demonstrate that melodic clustering around pentatonic subsets provides singers with a flexible tonal environment for improvisation while maintaining recognizable cultural identity. Addaquay (2025) further shows that techniques such as ornamentation, contour shaping, phrasing, and vocal flexibility enable performers to adapt melodic material while signaling identity through their stylistic choices. Integral to this tonal system is the practice of call-and-response, where a leader's melodic phrase is echoed or expanded by a chorus. Deeply rooted in communal musicking, this structure uses pentatonic frameworks to balance predictability with variation. Frishkopf (2021) emphasizes that in many traditions, rhythm and melody are inseparable: polyrhythmic structures interact with pentatonic tonalities to generate cyclical tension and release. Tonal elasticity expressed through glides, microtonal inflections, and vocal timbre further distinguishes African pentatonic practice from the fixed-pitch constraints of Western equal temperament. Ethnomusicological fieldwork has consistently shown that these strategies are not ornamental but fundamental, providing performances with emotive force and participatory depth. McKerrell (2022) extends this point by calling for translational ethnomusicology, in which music and dance are treated not merely as objects of study but as methods of producing and communicating performance aesthetics, grounding research outcomes in lived artistic knowledge.

The adaptability of the pentatonic system across diverse cultural contexts has drawn significant

scholarly attention. Sapovadia (2025) argues that the consonant nature of pentatonic scales, the structural simplicity of flutes, and music's role in ritual bonding reveal universal human tendencies that recur even in culturally isolated societies. His work challenges diffusionist theories by affirming the independent emergence of pentatonic systems shaped by biology, environment, and cultural practice. Within sub-Saharan Africa, pentatonic logics structure vocal and instrumental repertoires and facilitate intercultural fusion, making them highly transferable across diasporic contexts. Their durability lies in their capacity to survive displacement, as demonstrated by their reemergence in African American spirituals and gospel. The openness of pentatonic frameworks to improvisation, their compatibility with diverse rhythmic textures, and their ability to encode cultural memory have ensured their endurance as a cornerstone of African-derived musics worldwide.

IV. THE PENTATONIC INFLUENCE IN AMERICAN GOSPEL MUSIC

The imprint of the pentatonic scale is unmistakable in the development of African American gospel, where five-tone frameworks underpin vocalization, harmonization, and improvisation. Musicologists note that gospel melodies often rely on pentatonic-derived contours, enabling singers to sustain recognizable motifs while inserting spontaneous elaborations (Shelley, 2025). Yihe and Maoping (2024) found that pentatonic music elicits greater emotional pleasure and physiological responses than major and minor modes, underscoring its distinctive affective qualities. This structural flexibility allows performers to sustain musical continuity without rigid adherence to diatonic progressions, privileging vocal intensity and expressive depth. Complementing this, Costa et al. (2024) observed that pentatonic sequences were rated as more pleasant and emotionally engaging than monaural beats, inducing characteristic oscillatory brain responses that align with heightened relaxation and imagery. Such findings reinforce how pentatonic-based harmonizations supported parallel motion and timbral layering, fostering a communal texture central to gospel performance.

Improvisation remains a defining hallmark of gospel's stylistic identity, with roots traceable to African pentatonic practices. Melodic cells drawn from pentatonic subsets permit singers to extend, vary, and recycle phrases, sustaining a creative tension between fixed motifs and spontaneous invention. This logic resonates with statistical analyses of tonal variation that reveal adherence to universal power laws (Nan & Guan, 2023). Ornamentations such as slides, turns, and microtonal inflections intensify this improvisatory ethos by heightening emotional intensity and personalizing performance. Addaquay (2025) emphasizes that these devices are not mere embellishments but essential strategies through which African-descended singers articulate identity and affect in sacred contexts.

A further marker of pentatonic influence is the prominence of melisma and blue notes in gospel singing. Melismatic passages, where single syllables are drawn across multiple notes, exploit pentatonic flexibility to sustain vocal intensity, while blue notes, derived from lowered third, fifth, or seventh degrees, evoke African tonal sensibilities layered against Western harmonic backdrops. Scholars argue that these features distinguish gospel as a genre while maintaining continuity with African vocal aesthetics that privilege expressive intonation over tempered precision (Hunter, 2023; Jensen, 2024). Through ornamentation, tonal inflection, and pentatonic scaffolding, gospel singers transform African tonal heritage into a uniquely African American sacred idiom, creating a sonic space where cultural memory converges with innovation.

V. CASE STUDIES

Case Studies of Gospel Traditions and Artists

The Fisk Jubilee Singers were instrumental in preserving and popularizing African American spirituals and in shaping early concert-era presentations of Black sacred vocal music. Formed at Fisk University in 1871 to raise funds for the institution, the ensemble formalized many spirituals for choral performance and toured the United States and Europe, performances that included a White House appearance and international recognition that helped finance Fisk's first permanent building thereby reframing vernacular repertoire within Western concert conventions while retaining its participatory melodic core (Yarris, 2024; Doyle, 2024). The Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir provides a contemporary institutional analogue: Carol Cymbala's arrangements for large choral forces emphasize close voicings, call-and-response

structures, and parallel harmonies that produce dense timbral textures and prioritize congregational engagement over strict classical harmonic progression, sustaining an ensemble ethos traceable to earlier African-derived practices while employing modern production values (The Brooklyn Tabernacle, 2025).

Mahalia Jackson exemplifies how individual artistry channels African-derived tonal legacies within gospel performance. Critics and historians point to her contralto, phrasing, and ornamentation, grounded in spiritual repertory yet informed by blues timing, as a model of vernacular improvisation translated for concert audiences; scholarly analyses of her recordings demonstrate how modal, pentatonic-friendly contours, melisma, and rhetorical pacing conveyed communal feeling and sacred authority while securing mainstream recognition (Burford, 2018). Jackson's cultural and civic legacy continues to be the subject of scholarship and commemorative programming that foreground her role in mid-twentieth-century religious and political life (Arns, 2025).

Kirk Franklin represents a later, studio-mediated stage in gospel's evolution, synthesizing quartet call-and-response, improvisatory lead vocals, pentatonic-compatible riffs, and contemporary R&B/hip-hop textures to produce urban gospel forms that foreground both choir interplay and studio production. Interviews and institutional accounts document Franklin's deliberate blending of traditional gospel techniques with popular music idioms, demonstrating continuity of African-derived practice reframed for late-twentieth and early-twenty-first-century audiences (Cannarella, 2025).

Comparatively, traditional gospel embodied by spiritual repertory and early jubilee/choral arrangements tends to emphasize unison or homophonic textures, call-and-response, and melody-first structures that readily accommodate pentatonic contours, whereas modern gospel retains those melodic and participatory logics while integrating greater harmonic density, studio processing, and popular rhythmic forms. Rather than a binary opposition, the historical record reveals a spectrum: pentatonic-friendly melodic cells and improvisatory techniques persist even as arranging practices, amplification, and commercial production reshape their sonic presentation. A targeted corpus analysis of Fisk transcriptions, Jackson recordings, and Franklin tracks would concretely document how pentatonic contours persist, shift, or hybridize across contexts (Key, 2021).

VI. THEORETICAL AND CULTURAL IMPLICATIONS

Gospel music operates simultaneously as a site of cultural continuity and creative innovation within the African diaspora. The persistence of pentatonic tonal logics and participatory performance modes, call-and-response, heterophony, and melisma across Atlantic contexts demonstrates continuity in African-derived musical practices (Ezenibe & Nwankpa, 2025). These elements provided structural templates through which displaced communities maintained recognizable sonic identities despite disrupted social worlds. Gospel exemplifies innovation as African tonal predispositions were continually reimagined through interactions with European hymnody, revivalist traditions, written notation, and recording technologies, with pentatonic-derived resources emerging as dynamic tools that adapt to evolving social, spiritual, and technological contexts.

The intersections of music, identity, spirituality, and resistance are central to gospel's theoretical significance. Improvised scalar cells, melisma, blue-note inflections, and timbral layering function as embodied idioms of communal identity and spiritual authority (Reynolds, 2023; New Hampshire Center for Justice & Equity, 2024). Historically, from plantation contexts to urban churches and mass media, these idioms have also operated as tools of social critique and political mobilization. Gospel's rhetorical pacing and call-and-response align with oratorical and protest traditions that have animated movements for civil rights and social justice (Masila, 2025; Browdy & Milu, 2022). Theoretically, gospel becomes a lens for understanding how musical form encodes collective memory, spiritual epistemologies, and modes of social action.

These insights extend debates on how African musical heritage shapes American cultural and religious identity. Ekong (2024) demonstrates that African American culture profoundly influenced genres such as jazz, blues, and hip-hop, reshaping both national and global musical identities. Myrie et al. (2021) further illustrate how Black diasporic communities reinterpret identity through music,

using sound to resist dominant narratives, affirm embodied selves, and sustain intergenerational continuity. Together, these studies caution against reductive notions of "pure retention" or seamless continuity. Instead, rigorous scholarship must account for hybridity, agency, and local recontextualization while still recognizing structural survivals such as pentatonic frameworks.

Methodologically, this analysis points to the need for integrated approaches: archival transcription, corpus-scale pitch and scale analysis, and embodied performance ethnography offer complementary perspectives that no single method can capture in isolation. Comparative work across diasporic sites also becomes essential, illuminating how similar tonal resources are adapted under distinct social, liturgical, and technological constraints. Such inquiry enriches debates on cultural transmission, adaptation, and the politics of musical identity.

Future research questions emerge directly from this framework: How do pentatonic-derived pitch inventories vary across spiritual, jubilee, and modern gospel corpora? In what ways do studio production, amplification, and genre fusion reshape the perceptual role of pentatonic cells in contemporary gospel? And how do gospel performance aesthetics contribute to spiritual authority and political mobilization in different historical moments? Addressing these questions requires mixed methodologies, transcriptional analysis, music information retrieval (MIR) tools, embodied ethnography, and archival study to fully capture gospel's cultural and theoretical significance.

VII. CHALLENGES AND CRITIQUES

Any discussion of the pentatonic imprint on gospel and African American sacred repertoires must contend with the risks of oversimplification. Scholars caution against framing gospel music as a straightforward transfer of African pentatonic practices without acknowledging the hybridization that occurred under the influence of European hymnody, Western harmonic conventions, and American revivalist song traditions. Marimbe (2024) demonstrates how Pentecostal worship in Zimbabwe fuses African musical sensibilities with Christian hymnody, creating hybrid forms that reflect negotiated fusion rather than pure retention. Perks (2024) reinforces this perspective by proposing "hybridity strain" as a conceptual tool to analyze music-cultural fusion, showing how hybrid forms emerge variably through context-specific collaboration rather than as fixed outcomes. Together, these arguments destabilize linear narratives of continuity, emphasizing that African-derived tonal frameworks were recontextualized within systems favoring functional harmony, cadential closure, and written notation.

In ethnomusicology, such complexities fuel debates over authenticity, cultural appropriation, and preservation. Some critics argue that an overemphasis on African retention risks idealizing a singular "African essence," while others foreground the agency of African American musicians in reworking multiple influences to create new sonic identities. Ilesanmi (2021) critiques essentialist narratives that cast African music as inherently rhythmic and "exotic," noting that such views exaggerate cultural difference and frame hybridity as deviation. Similarly, Kallmier (2024) highlights how notions of "pure gospel" remain contested, with hybridity central not only to worship practices but also to theology and broader Christian cultural expression. These critiques underscore that authenticity and hybridity are less oppositional categories than ongoing negotiations of identity, ownership, and representation.

A second persistent challenge lies in documenting oral traditions and improvisational practices. Because African-derived sacred music circulates through live performance, participatory enactment, and embodied transmission, written notation often fails to capture its expressive breadth. Iheanacho (2021) stresses that oral and embodied practices underpin the shaping of Christianity in Africa, while Izu (2024) shows how oral traditions preserve and transform indigenous musical vocabularies in ways resistant to codification. Improvisation, microtonal inflections, and call-and-response interactions often elude transcription, raising methodological questions for ethnomusicologists. New technologies partly address this. Sepideh & Shapour's (2025) computational study of oral traditions employs pitch histograms and optimization to analyze tuning systems, recovering logics invisible to fixed notation. Fenner (2024) points to how digitized repositories of early spirituals provide valuable historical context yet cannot capture improvisational nuance. Sebastian et al. (2022) similarly highlight both the promise and limits of

computational tools, which excel at extracting sonic detail but remain unable to fully convey embodied gestures, communal participation, and the improvisatory spirit that define live performance.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that African pentatonic heritage is a foundational structural force, rather than a peripheral curiosity in shaping gospel vocal traditions in the United States. From the Fisk Jubilee Singers' codification of spirituals into the concert spiritual tradition to Mahalia Jackson's sanctified contralto and Kirk Franklin's fusion of gospel with R&B and hip-hop idioms, the pentatonic framework persists as a generative engine of melodic, participatory, and improvisatory practices. Its resilience across centuries attests to a profound cultural continuity. What began as oral, African-derived modal structures has endured, adapted, and flourished within Westernized, commercialized, and technologically mediated environments. The historical, theoretical, and case-based analyses converge on a shared insight that gospel music embodies both continuity and innovation. It preserves African-derived tonal and participatory logics while simultaneously reworking them to meet shifting cultural, spiritual, and aesthetic demands. The pentatonic system, with its melodic accessibility and emotional immediacy, has proven uniquely adaptable to contexts ranging from small congregations to mass choirs and global commercial platforms. Also, gospel's enduring emphasis on call-and-response, improvisation, and collective participation underscores its role as both a site of resistance to cultural erasure and a vehicle for shaping American religious and cultural identity.

Tracing how African tonal logics shape gospel traditions reveals broader implications beyond gospel studies, illuminating the profound influence of African musical heritage on diasporic genres like blues, jazz, and R&B. Each of these genres reconfigures pentatonic and modal practices within distinct cultural and historical conditions, yet all participate in a transatlantic dialogue of sound and identity. Future research will benefit from comparative analysis across these genres, mapping how the same tonal building blocks generate divergent yet interconnected aesthetic worlds. In reaffirming the centrality of the pentatonic to gospel music, this study highlights the inseparability of African heritage from American cultural expression. Gospel stands as a dynamic archive of diasporic memory, resilience, and creativity, bearing witness to the enduring influence of African musical systems on the spiritual, emotional, and cultural fabric of American life.

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