

## INTRODUCTION

When Rev. Clay Evans journeyed to Chicago from Brownsville, Tennessee, in 1945, he brought the rich cultural and religious traditions of black southern culture. One of these traditions, a folk orality, had dramatically shaped Evans's voice. This orality—a vast matrix of speaking tones, singing techniques, styles of communication, vernacular expressions, and rhetorical devices—shaped the ways black southern migrants in Chicago expressed themselves in secular and religious spaces. The Reverend Otis Moss Jr. recalled the uniqueness of Evans's voice: “He was gifted in music and song,” Moss said. “He had the ability to touch and attract people from all levels of experience. And he had the ability to take his gifts in music and song and incorporate that with the gospel of Jesus Christ and the building of a great and dynamic church. His church became known as literally a spiritual powerhouse for great leadership, dynamic preaching, and great music.”<sup>1</sup>

Evans organized Fellowship Missionary Baptist Church on Sunday, September 10, 1950. During Evans's fifty years as senior pastor of “The Ship,” as it was famously known in Chicago and throughout the United States, Fellowship Church became a center of healing that offered a soothing

balm for the many blues plaguing its members. Each Sunday and throughout the week, Fellowship became a place where attendees' ultimate concerns—their joys and sorrows—were articulated artfully with the raw acuity of the blues singer and the audacious, sophisticated hope of the gospel preacher.

Music, in particular, was a primary avenue through which healing was administered at the “The Ship.” Minister Louis Farrakhan reflected on the unique cultural contribution southern migrants like Evans made to the religious worship experience in Chicago in the mid-1900s. These individuals, Farrakhan said, brought a creative mixture of sacred and secular musical sensibilities along with a fiery passion for congregational worship:

Well, I'll put it like this, we as a people coming through the hardship of the transatlantic slave trade and the evil of slavery, what did we have on the plantation to comfort us, but our music, our songs. So out of the depth of our pain came “swing low sweet chariot.” “Deep river my soul is over Jordan. I want to cross over into campground.” Those spirituals comforted us. So we've always been a people of song. Always been a people of dance. And no matter where we are we've always been a people of praise. So my brother's unique voice coming up out of the South . . . it's the people of Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana fleeing the pain of the farm as a sharecropper, fleeing

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that to come North to find refuge in this new city, Chicago. Rev. Evans was one of those who came from the South to the North and what did he bring with him? He brought with him the songs of praise and the uniqueness of his voice. It had a stamp that when you heard it, “That’s Rev. Evans.” The uniqueness of his style of delivery, it was pure Clay Evans.<sup>2</sup>

By the time black southern migrants like Evans arrived in Chicago in the middle of the twentieth century, both the blues and gospel music had emerged as primary vehicles for analyzing and expressing African Americans’ experiences of suffering and resilience in urban settings. As scholar Wallace D. Best argues: “The content of the blues has served as a lyrical map of the African American urban world. . . . The gospel music of Chicago . . . revealed a similar lyrical map with a similar take on the African American experience in Chicago.”<sup>3</sup>

Preachers like Clay Evans were the working-class orators of the black experience who intuitively merged the blues and gospel to express the hurts and hopes of their people.<sup>4</sup> This form of preaching has been described and understood culturally as “blues preaching.” Blues preaching was a spirituals-and-blues-inspired tradition of preaching that circulated throughout various parts of the South in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Blues preachers became significant pillars in African American communities in northern cities like Chicago and Detroit as their ministries both uplifted and informed the congregations they served. The

skills of the blues preacher were not acquired in a classroom or the result of some innate vocal genius. The blues preacher's skills were forged in the fiery furnace of the racism, brutality, and suffering African Americans experienced in the South in the early 1900s.

Between 1900 and 1930, whites lynched a black person at least twice a year in the seventeen counties making up the Mississippi Delta, not far from Evans's hometown of Brownsville, Tennessee.<sup>5</sup> African Americans' constant fear of the violent retaliation they would experience if they publicly opposed racism forced many in the South to internalize their fears and rage in silence. This psychological and physical terror nevertheless sponsored an economy of hope and resilience voiced in the black expressive culture of the blues. As the father of black theology of liberation, James H. Cone, argues: "The blues recognize that black people have been hurt and scared by the brutalities of white society. But there is hope in what Richard Wright calls the 'endemic capacity to live.' This hope provided the strength to survive, and the openness to the intensity of life's pains without being destroyed by them."<sup>6</sup> In other words, through the blues, people whose bodies had been strained and drained from slavery and its aftermath resolved to resiliently belt out their private, formerly inaudible sighs. Houston Baker Jr. shares Cone's sentiments. Baker argues the blues, or rather, the many material elements making up and giving voice to the blues—a growling guitar, a raspy voice lamenting lost love, or the bitter lyrics bemoaning life as a sharecropper, for example—are all musical personifications of concrete life

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experience. In short, the blues summarize the vast dimensions of African Americans' experiences, especially experiences of grief, suffering, and loss.

Through their sermons, blues preachers used the powerful expressions about life found in black musical traditions like the blues and gospel to educate, encourage, and inspire African Americans. Blues preachers like Evans were symbols of possibility among black communities during a time the United States had initiated local and national policies to oppress African Americans. In the face of such systematic efforts to inhibit black progress, Rev. Clay Evans dared in his preaching to mobilize African Americans in collective quests toward more abundant life. In fact, communal movement beyond oppressive boundaries served as Fellowship's primary identity and mission. Evans's constant circulation of the metaphors of "fellowship" and "ship" in his preaching and singing opposed national policies of discrimination and asserted more positive representations of black identity and citizenship. The theme of "fellowship" was evoked regularly during Fellowship's worship services. This theme conveyed two primary characteristics of Fellowship's worship experience represented in the church's name: radical communion and radical mobility. Evans's use of the theme of "fellowship" throughout his fifty-year ministry served as an invitation for people to seek out communion and mobility. A brief discussion about these two characteristics of "fellowship" will be helpful here.

The communal aspect of Fellowship's mission was conveyed regularly during the church's worship services and,

consequently, during the church's weekly radio broadcast, *What a Fellowship Hour*.<sup>7</sup> The radio broadcast opened with Fellowship's choir singing the theme song, "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms." This cherished Protestant hymn testifies about the rewards of seeking more genuine communion with God. The song's first verse includes a phrase that Evans would use to rhetorically construct Fellowship's mission in terms of unity:

What a fellowship, what a joy divine,  
Leaning on the everlasting arms;  
What a blessedness, what a peace is mine,  
Leaning on the everlasting arms.<sup>8</sup>

The lyrics and logic of this song became lenses through which Evans interpreted and articulated Fellowship's identity and mission. For Evans, the rewards of fellowship with God conveyed in "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms" had implications for interpersonal relationships, or fellowship, between human beings. Evans's signature catchphrase during the beginning of worship services at "The Ship" fused both divine and human implications of fellowship:

What a ship! What a ship! What a ship! It's a kin-ship.  
It's friend-ship. It's a relation-ship, and all that means  
is, what a fellowship! Are you on board?! I say are you  
on board?!<sup>9</sup>

For Evans, Fellowship was a church in which people could

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forge closer relationships with one another as they sought closer relationships with God. Evans's particular use of "ship" imagery served as a metaphorical link to the images of ships portrayed as places of refuge throughout the Holy Bible. Both Old and New Testament Scriptures contain dramatic depictions of ships as vessels of protection. In Genesis, Noah's ark protected human and animal passengers from a catastrophic flood. Similarly, in Mark 4:35-41, Jesus, a passenger with his disciples on a small ship, prevents a sudden storm from capsizing the vessel. In both of these Scriptures, the ship serves as a symbol of communal salvation—a place where various communities find protection and hope for new life. Thus, communion, the cultivation of positive relationships with others regardless of race or religion, became a central aspect of Fellowship's identity and mission.

Evans believed strongly that since communion with God provided the basic resources necessary for the flourishing of life, then fellowship between people should also provide similar benefits. In other words, Evans's emphasis on the theme of "communion" provided for members a model for how to lovingly relate to one another. African American studies professor Johari Jabir offers a compelling analysis of Fellowship's theme song, "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms," also known as "What a Fellowship." Jabir said, "Listening to the church's hard swinging version of the Protestant staple, 'What A Fellowship' reminds me of Paul Gilroy's discussion of the ship imagery in the Black Atlantic memory of music." For Jabir, Evans's use of "ship" imagery

conveyed a mission of gathering a disenfranchised, oppressed black diaspora for the purpose of healing and mobilization. Jabir explains further:

Just as enslaved Africans imagined an alternate “ship” of Zion as a signification on slave ships, Rev. Evans took hold of the memory of that ship of violence, terror, and irreparable rupture, and he turned it into a vessel of freedom, love, and acceptance. A giant in the forest of black preachers, Rev. Evans’ labor as a caring pastor connected to the needs of people is important to note. What I find so remarkable about Rev. Evans is the way in which he allowed the blues to serve as the organic root for his preaching, pastorate, and activism. Stylistically, his preaching is steeped in the bluesman preachers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He preached a theology of the blues that affirmed the suffering, liberation, and nobility of black people as divinely human in a society that tried to denigrate their existence. As a priest charged to care for the community and as a soldier of love on the battlefield for freedom Rev. Evans created a “whosoever church” founded upon relationality. This church was a house of blues where anybody and everybody could enter in and find healing and refuge.<sup>10</sup>

While the mission of “The Ship” celebrates communion, it also emphasizes *mobility*. Ships sail. They travel. They

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embark. They venture to new worlds. And they bring passengers with them. Despite racist national policies designed to contain African Americans during the Cold War era, Evans's circulation of "ship" imagery encouraged radical figurative and literal movement among Fellowship's passengers. Whether listening by radio or worshiping in person, once on board "The Ship," Fellowship's passengers became a people on the move, a people together on their way to someplace better. Evans's frequent call to those in person or listening over the radio to get on board "The Ship" was an invitation to participate in the experience of a communal odyssey that Fellowship, a church journeying to a new land, promised to offer each passenger. Those who were brave enough to get on board soon found themselves on a journey, a beautiful journey, toward healing and hope and the best of themselves. Even after all these years, they can still hear their captain calling, "All aboard!"

## NOTES

1. Rev. Otis Moss Jr., interview by Patty Nolan-Fitzgerald, 2012, Trinity United Church of Christ, Chicago.
2. Minister Louis Farrakhan, interview by Zach Mills, 2012, Rev. Clay Evans's home, Chicago.
3. Wallace D. Best, *Passionately Human, No Less Divine: Religion and Culture in Black Chicago, 1915–1952* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 110.

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4. Best, *Passionately Human*, 110.
5. Nick Salvatore, *Singing in a Strange Land: C. L. Franklin, the Black Church, and the Transformation of America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 5.
6. James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (New York: Seabury, 1972), 140.
7. Evans's weekly *What a Fellowship Hour* radio broadcast first aired in 1952 and continued uninterrupted until Evans's retired in 2000.
8. Delores Carpenter and Nolan E. Williams Jr., eds., *The African American Heritage Hymnal* (Chicago: GIA, 2001), 371.
9. This quote can be heard in two virtually identical iterations in several YouTube videos of Fellowship's worship services. One video ("Rev. Clay EVANS What a Fellowship Hour OPENING," video, 4:29, uploaded by BrothaRollins, August 5, 2007, <http://tinyurl.com/yd9a4ja6>) is from an earlier worship service. Another video ("What a Fellowship [Celebration Version]," video, 3:04, uploaded by fstanley35, April 10, 2008, <http://tinyurl.com/y8dkm2nf>) was recorded in September 2005, after Evans retired from Fellowship but presided over Fellowship's reunion concert, which brought back choir members that had sung with the church's choir when Evans served as pastor.
10. Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s *The Signifying Monkey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) offers a helpful description of vernacular signification in Afro-American cultures as a rhetorical practice.