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Date
"POP GOES THE GOSPEL" - THE GROWTH OF GOSPEL MUSIC IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The subject of gospel music has generated intellectual discourse researchers in the field of ethnomusicology. This is due to the sporadic development of the genre and the unique position it occupies in the field of popular music in Nigeria. Furthermore, the music has witnessed several innovations from music artists leading to its transformations over the years. A musical genre that was initially the exclusive reserve of the church has now become an entertainment form that has received wide acceptance both within and outside the shores of Nigeria. The paper therefore discusses the factors responsible for the growth and development of this genre. It will also examine the role of globalization in the development of gospel music in Nigeria and x-ray the numerous foreign and local styles used in bringing about the development of the music in the popular music scene.

Key words: Gospel Music, Globalization, Popular Music, Styles.

Introduction

The popular music scene in Nigeria seems to be enjoying so much publicity and patronage. The reason is quite obvious; popular music has been seen both as a form of entertainment and a means of propagating and integrating the right values in the community. Pop (short from of popular) is a term generally used to describe the extent of acceptance of a thing by the public (Onyeji, 2002). It is a music genre that encompasses several styles, that is readily comprehensible to a large proportion of the population. Its
appreciation requires little or no knowledge of musical theory or technique (Glenon, 1980).

Presently in Nigeria, there is an overflow of gospel music and it is enjoying so much popularity in the popular music terrain. There is no denying the fact that gospel music plays a very important role in the Church. It serves, as a viable instrument for worship. It is also a medium for the spread of the good news in the church (Asuquo, 2000). That is the reason why many churches find it as an indispensable part of Christian worship. However, gospel music is moving away from the confines of the church and finding its way into the Nigerian entertainment industry. This musical form that used to be the exclusive reserve of the church now enjoys serious patronage in media houses, social functions, schools and political rallies. The music has listenership that cuts across religious divide. Another interesting aspect of the development is the many syncretism styles we now have in the music. There is no musical genre from the secular field that does not have its own gospel music variant. The effect of other genres from the western world on this music is worthy of note thus giving the music its pride of place in the global scene.

Inspired by recent works on the production, circulation and reception of Gospel Music in Nigeria (Adedeji, 2004), therefore examines the sudden explosion of gospel music in Nigeria and investigates the process the process by which the genre is created, mediated and disseminated in the Nigerian society.
WHAT IS GOSPEL MUSIC?

The definition of gospel music is hinged on the word “gospel”. According to Pogorzelski (2006) the term gospel is from the Old English god-spell meaning “good tidings”. It is a Christian word referring to the salvation of men through the atoning blood of Jesus Christ (Bolinder, 1986). Gold (1958) defines Gospel music as music that is written to express either personal, spiritual or a communal belief regarding the Christian life. He stressed further that the music gives a Christian alternative to mainstream secular in terms of the varying music styles.

Scholars have attempted to define gospel music, albeit from various angles. According to Asobele (2003), the term gospel music is generally assumed to connote the Christian religious music. The degree and manner in which the religious elements in these tunes are portrayed vary according to personal conviction. He concluded that irrespective of the numerous genres used to perform gospel music, they have a unifying factor, which is the message of the salvation of Christ. Jones (1975) defined black gospel music as a synthesis of West Africa and Afro–American music, poetry, and, drama, a body of urban contemporary black religious music of rural folk origin, which is celebration of the Christian experience, salvation and hope. According to Bolinder (1986), gospel music has a powerful effect of reaching to the soul of the hearer’s more than ordinary words. That is the reason why many pastors employed this medium to their advantage in their crusades.

The earlier concept of gospel music and its usage is quite different from what we have in the present day gospel music. According to Ojo (1995), the main theme of gospel musical composition is the propagation of the good news. The practitioners of gospel music take
it to mean a kind of music composed and performed by Christian men and women who refer to their music as ministration of good news in songs. Thus, gospel music can be taken to mean songs performed to spread the gospel of God.

Form all the definitions listed, it is clear that gospel music is synonymous with Christian religious music. This is because gospel music is a by-product of the Christian religion. The music is used as a personal testimony to direct people’s inward mind to spiritual freedom. Like other forms of Christian music, the creation, performance, significance, and even the definition of gospel music varies according to culture and social context.

Gospel music is composed and performed for many purposes, including aesthetic pleasure, religious or ceremonial purposes, and as an entertainment product for the marketplace (Wikipedia).

Gospel music in general is characterized by dominant vocals (often with strong use of harmony) referencing lyrics of a religious nature, particularly Christian (Blackwell, 1978). According to Broughton (1996) subgenres include contemporary gospel, urban contemporary gospel (sometimes referred to as "black gospel"), Southern gospel, and modern gospel music now more commonly known as praise and worship music or contemporary Christian music.

Gospel music in Nigeria

Gospel music no doubt has its root firmly established in the Nigerian music industry. This is given the wide range of publicity it has received in both electronic and print media. The growth of several professional musicians in the field has given rise to the development of the style. Many secular musicians are shifting grounds to gospel music.
because of its wide acceptability and the seemingly acclaimed success. The early gospel musicians had a singular aim: to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ in songs with no string attached. Musicians who ruled the gospel music in the seventies and eighties had a stream of followers only at the church level. The messages they proclaimed were evangelistic in nature. This statement is corroborated by Asobele (2003) who believes that the term gospel music is generally assumed to connote the Christian religious music. The degree and manner in which the religious elements in these tunes are portrayed vary according to personal conviction. He concluded that irrespective of the numerous genres used to perform gospel music, they have a unifying factor, which is the message of the salvation of Christ. The popular music of the early 60’s has in one way or the other been influenced by Christian religious texts. Prominent musicians that employed this medium are Juju musicians like Ebenezer Obey, I.K Dairo and King Sunny Ade. The ECWA church choir however gained prominence as the first gospel musicians to have recorded an album which brought them to the lime light thereby blazing the trail for other groups to follow. Stylistically, their songs were choral in nature, based on slow folkloric rhythm overlaid with Yoruba religious texts.

The early 70’s witnessed a group in the eastern part of Nigeria that took gospel music by storm in the wake of the post-civil war in Nigeria. The “Voice of the cross” led by Emmanuel and Lazarus started their gospel band with the use of the voice and the keyboard. Their ability to adapt the keyboard to suit indigenous tunes set to Christian text endeared them to the lovers of gospel music. Their major language of expression was in the Ibo language. This made them very popular in the eastern part of Nigeria. Their record ‘Satan is in trouble’ made it to the top of the chat in the eighties. Other title tracks
of voice of the cross are ‘good morning Jesus’, praise and worship songs, and Gospel Highlife. However, they were only able to appeal to the Ibo speaking audience in the eastern part of Nigeria. The Good women choir of the Christ Apostolic Church, Ibadan made their debut in the gospel music scene in the mid- seventies in the western part of Nigeria with renditions that were mainly in the Yoruba language. Led by Mrs. D.O Fasoyin, the good women choir that comprises mainly women in the church able to fuse western musical instruments with indigenous instrument. The major record that shot them to stardom was a Christmas collections titled odun nlo s’opin (the year is ending). The choir has its fans mainly in the Yoruba speaking areas of Nigeria. Other gospel musicians that made their debut in the 1970s are Bola Aare and Sola Rotimi. There were many other gospel exponents that made a considerable mark in their right. However, the explosion of gospel music did not come until the mid nineties with the strides of musicians like Panam Percy Paul (from Jos), Lanre Teriba, Tope Alabi, (from Lagos) Sammy Okposo, Asu Ekiye (from the Niger Delta region). The year 2000 witnessed modern developments in Gospel popular music with the introduction of non-sonic effects for the enhancement of the gospel music presentations and consumption.

The Changing faces of Gospel Music in Nigeria

Over the years, gospel music has developed outside the confines of the church and is seen to be competing favorably with other secular popular music genres. Various factors are responsible for this development. The influence of western ideals is partly responsible for this development. Since the world is a global village, the need for repackaging our music to meet with international standard has led to various fusions acceptable to the world media. We now have gospel jazz, gospel hip-hop, gospel soul, gospel rhythm and
blues, gospel reggae etc. What is uppermost in an average gospel music artiste is money and fame. This is also precipitated on numerous musical awards both at national and international levels. The criteria for selections at these awards form the basis of the packaging we have in our music scenes today.

The influx of gospel musicians from the United States of America to Nigeria for yearly concert events has raised the level of awareness in the popular music scene. The organizers invite local artistes to collaborate with their American counterparts thus giving them an opportunity to showcase their talents to the outside world. You now have to pay the type of gate fee you use to watch other secular musicians from abroad. Corporate companies that used to be wary about sponsoring religious concerns are now fighting to host both national and international gospel artistes. An example of such event is the yearly concert held by Matthew Ashimolowo at the National stadium. This concert features international starts like Kirk Franklin, Arita Williams, Ron Kenoly, Mary Mary, Lionel Peterson and a host of other Nigerian Artiste like Dekunle Fuji, Sammy Okposo, Ebenezer Obey, Tosin Martins, Bouque, etc.

The numerous concerts held by major gospel musicians in Nigeria have also given the music an international boost. In the past, the international terrain was dominated by other secular musicians. However, with the various innovations and creativity, musicians like Sammy Okposo, the midnight crew, and a host of others have been able to break the frontiers and their music is enjoying patronage at international levels.
Cultural Revolution

The gospel music scene has enjoyed tremendous influence from its fusion with traditional musical genres. This some gospel music exponents call the age of Cultural Revolution in the industry. We now have indigenous gospel music adapted to fit the traditional music genre like highlife, waka, Apala, Sakara, Juju, Afrobeat etc.

Gospel musicians operating on this medium also use the stylistic features prevalent in the aforementioned genres. The only difference is the theme. There is however the global perspective to this development. While we agree that the use of western instruments is a major backbone to the making of the music, the effects and creative ingenuity of some of the gospel exponents in creating a genre that marries both the western and African traditional contents is worth mentioning. Artistes like Dekunle Fuji have included American raps in their gospel Fuji albums. The likes of Kunle Ajayi and Mike Aremu have created some stylistic variants of gospel jazz fully injected with African traditional folklores to make some cultural statements. A major achievement of this innovation is the propagation of our culture to the outside world. With these innovations, the likes of Sammy Okposo, Kefee and Asu Ekiye have projected the rich Niger Delta culture that won them international awards thus placing Nigeria at a vintage position globally.

Changing of camps

Gospel music received a big boost with the coming in of giants from the secular music scene. Sunny okosun is a household name in the secular music business. Popularly known as the Ozzidi king, Okosun ruled the music industry in the late seventies till the late eighties with his brand of music that was somewhat a fusion of high-life and reggae.
The theme of his music then was freedom and emancipation of the black race. The nineties however saw Okosun deviating to the gospel music scene. To the Christians, this was a welcome development as it was seen as conversion to Christianity. (Pentecostals often see Christians that are not born again as mere professors) His brand of music has not changed; but his lyrics have. His main theme is on the salvation of souls. Has since turned an evangelist and pastors his own church. His major works include Songs of praise, a great change, and Save our soul. This he did till his death 2008.

Another exponent in the secular music industry that has since pitched his tent in the gospel music scene is Chief Ebenezer Obey whose exit from the juju music scene to gospel music was seen as a big blow to juju music lovers who regarded him as the miliki specialist. This is given the fact that Ebenezer Obey brought the juju music to its zenith in the early sixties till the late eighties. However, his decision to retire saw him embracing the gospel. He established a church and staged come- back to the music scene; this time gospel music. Like his counter-part, evangelist Ebenezer Obey Fabiyi (as he is now called) is now a minister and gospel singer. His works include Good news, walking over, and I am a winner.

As male musicians were changing camps, their female counterparts were not left out. The doyen of the Nigerian music scene, Onyeka Owenu came into limelight in the mid-eighties. A former broadcaster, Onyeka dumped journalism for music. She made her mark in the Nigerian popular musical scene with accolades and awards. But now, Onyeka is fully into gospel music. Whatever the reasons for the movement of the big stars to gospel music business are, there are implications. Firstly, it has led to the stiff competition being experienced right now in the gospel music industry. It has also led to
popularize the music genre since many of them were internationally acclaimed popular musicians.

There is a common practice among musician that makes the distinction of gospel musician very difficult to distinguish. This is because of the fact that many secular musicians now incorporate gospel tunes into their works. Examples are Orlando Owo’s Cain and Abel. Another track is Bi mo ti n’bo lona by Sunny Ade. These musicians are highlife and juju exponents respectively. Others are Paul Play Dairo whose rendition of mo s’ori ire would almost mark him as a gospel musician. Yet, these are popular musicians in their own right.

Conclusion

Nigerian gospel music is no longer the exclusive right of the church. It has now assumed a secular dimension judging by the wide acceptance both within and outside the church circle. The rate at which musicians are being “converted” into gospel music shows that gospel music is developing by the day in Nigeria. The younger generation is adopting western ideas and fashions and fussing it into the music. The upsurge of new artistes and the stiff competition has led to the introduction of some typologies in the gospel music industry. This has changed the perception of gospel music and has given it a niche in the mainstream of world music. What the exponents will make of this development is left to be seen in years to come.
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