

# Introduction

## Academia, Presbyterians, and Me

WHITE PRESBYTERIAN CONGREGANT IN HIS LATE FORTIES: It's so nice that you are here to study our church. So, you're getting your degree in what now?

ME: Ethnomusicology. It's—

WHITE PRESBYTERIAN CONGREGANT IN HIS LATE FORTIES: [*Interrupting*] So, the study of ethnic music?

ME: Well, it's more the study of music in culture, or culture in music, depending. Like musical anthropology.

WHITE PRESBYTERIAN CONGREGANT IN HIS LATE FORTIES: But you're here at a Presbyterian church? [*Pauses, considers*] Well, I guess if you think about it, we're all part of some ethnic group or another. Huh. I never thought about it. [*Grinning, he calls down the hallway to his wife*] Hey honey! We're ethnic!

It is indeed true that White American mainline Protestants are an unusual subject of study for an ethnomusicologist like myself. It is so strange that I am opening (*White*)*Washing Our Sins Away* by telling my own story—as a White person, a Presbyterian, a scholar, a musician—to situate this work within the broader study of American religion, music, and society. Mainline Protestantism still lies outside the expected and actualized arena of ethnomusicology as a discipline. This is because, as the congregant's preceding comments allude to, interconnected scaffolds of race, class, and

power have structured the entwined historical development of both the academy and religious institutions in America. In other words, White Christians have normally studied the cultural practices of “Other” people rather than our own.

As a small child, some of my favorite memories involve the visceral experience of playing at church: stacking hymnals like play blocks, hiding in the closet of choir robes, pretending the long golden candle-lighter was a magic wand, smelling the pungent wax of old candles in the storage closet, and—perhaps best of all—pulling on the bell rope. My father was the pastor of a small Presbyterian congregation and quite often, when both my parents were busy during the week, I would get to go with him to work. Our northern Minnesota town so tiny that it did not have a traffic light. Life was pretty simple. Weekly schedules of Sunday worship and Christian education and Wednesday choir practices (my mother is an alto) shaped much of the ebb and flow of life.

In 1989, we moved from what was basically southern Canada to southern California. My father had decided to pursue a graduate degree in clinical psychology at Fuller Theological Seminary’s School of Psychology and Marriage and Family Therapy. As a kid, my mind was blown by new-to-me racial and linguistic diversity of the Los Angeles suburbs. I had never thought about race much because everyone around me had been White. In Minnesota, I think I had seen one Black student in my whole school and foreign languages were not prevalent, aside from someone’s Lutheran grandpa praying a Swedish blessing or foodie discussions of *lutefisk* (a traditional Nordic delicacy of dried, aged fish pickled in lye) and *potica* (an Eastern European dessert bread). In my new California school, I was one of only three White students in my class, my new best friend was an Argentinian immigrant kid from across the apartment courtyard, and the biracial clerks at the local grocery store were multilingual. I did not have a lot to express about my own identity besides “White”—my parents had some vague details about our European-rooted family histories, but they were among increasing numbers of White Americans who were not thinking of themselves as coming from specific European-descended ethnic groups, but rather as simply “American.”<sup>1</sup>

As we settled into our new environment, our family did what most pastors’ families do once they have left full-time pulpit service: We went “church shopping.” In our tiny rural Minnesota town, the idea of “shopping” for church options would have been fairly laughable due to the small size of the community (there were only four churches in town), but in the

California suburbs, our family's worship choices were reflecting broader societal shifts in living patterns and religious consumption (see chapter 1).

We tried out so many churches. Combining my mother's heavily evangelical background, my father's higher church tendencies (despite a severe aversion to incense), and my own ten-year-old preferences, Sunday dinners became a "postgame" analysis that would put many sports analysts to shame. While the church facility, size, and architecture, preaching, and other aspects were heavily debated, music was always a central feature. Did they have a choir? If yes, how was the choir? If no, what did they have instead? How was the repertoire? How was the vocal quality? Did the musicians seem like they were worshipping or performing? Along those lines, how was the organist? If they didn't have an organist, what did they have? What were the songs that we sang as a congregation? Did the other people in the congregation actually sing, too? Overall, musically, was what we had just experienced any good? And on what criteria were we assigning a rating of "good"?

Just by the time our family had finally settled into an alternate Sunday compromise between a Nazarene church on odd Sundays and an Episcopalian congregation on even ones, we moved and had to start it all again.

This time, in 1992, we repeated the whole process with a heavy dose of local Mennonite subculture in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Things were different then because the church music scene had evolved. More and more congregations were offering an informal Sunday morning service with modern, amplified praise band music in addition to their traditional organ-and-choir-based worship. These services were similar to the acoustic-guitar-toting Jesus People of the 1960s and '70s, but there was something different about this newer repertoire and its performance. Mainline Protestant traditionalists seemed to be suspicious of the music's secular sound and evangelical overtones. Although it was hard to see the bigger picture as it was emerging at the time, White Protestant congregations of both mainline and evangelical varieties were beginning to draw battle lines for a pervasive, sprawling aesthetic and theological conflict that came to be known as the Worship Wars. Now, not only did our family have to decide on a congregation, we had to pick between Traditional or Contemporary worship. Sunday dinner debates continued.

I left my parents to figure it out for themselves by going off to the College of William and Mary. I loved my new church in Williamsburg, Virginia. First Presbyterian had a historical brick façade that blended into the colonial town, solid preaching in which Pastor Wilson asked

hard questions more often than he dispensed easy answers, and it was musically top-notch in my eighteen-year-old opinion. My family had never identified racial diversity as an important factor in our Sunday dinner postgame analyses, and I was only slowly coming to a greater awareness of the world, so I was not surprised or particularly bothered that First Presbyterian was overwhelmingly White (like most American Presbyterian congregations). To the contrary, I took it as a good, progressive sign that one of the paid section leaders in the choir was a dark-skinned Black man whose smiling face stood out in contrast to the congregation. The Sunday morning worshipers never did diversify significantly over the four years that I attended the church, and only years later would I read sociologist Gerardo Marti's work on White congregations hiring worship leaders and musicians of "conspicuous color" in efforts to diversify their faith communities.<sup>2</sup> At the time, I was just happy that the choir sounded great, the congregation sang enthusiastically, the organist was a university keyboard professor, and, on top of everything else, First Pres had a college handball group that took practice as seriously as our Sunday brunch waffles.

I was not, however, at William and Mary primarily to find a place to worship. I was there to study ethnomusicology. Drawn by the excellent mentor that I found in Dr. Anne Rasmussen, I saw my entry into the field back in 1998 as a positive, diversity-advancing choice (this was before we would have used the term "woke"). I was initially attracted to the study of music "in culture,"<sup>3</sup> or "as culture,"<sup>4</sup> because of my personal fascination with unfamiliar genres of music and the societies that produce them. I had been playing hammered dulcimer since I was a kid and that had taken me on a winding road that led through all kinds of music, from American old-time to Irish, Balkan, Greek, Turkish, and more. The more exotic the music was, the better; *everything* seemed so much more interesting than the classical and Christian musics my conservative parents had allowed in their home when I was growing up. I dove into ethnomusicology head first. As an undergraduate student, I played in the Indonesian gamelan ensemble and fell in love with Middle Eastern music, so much so that I studied Arabic and double-majored in Middle Eastern studies. I even spent time volunteering with the Presbyterian church in Cairo following my graduation.

I thought I had traveled fairly extensively, but working and living in Egypt was a culture shock that threw my own previous touristic experiences into sharp relief for me. The Sunday dinner points of difference my parents and I used to identify as marking American churches dramatically

different from each other seemed almost insignificant now. Everything in Egypt felt so different, from the minutia of daily life to worship music and church culture to broader social norms and beliefs. It took endless hours to explain my usual American way of life to the local Egyptians, and equal amounts of time to explain their ways of life and music to the people at home. I started becoming disturbed by the unevenness of it—I was acting as a representative of Egyptian music and culture to my people at home in the United States. They thought I was an expert in it; I had specialized in this area at a nationally renowned university, after all, and I had been living in Cairo for about six months. On paper, this looked good, and I did have more experience with Egypt than the average American, but every day in Cairo, new surprises showed me how unprepared and unqualified I was for this interpretative role.

The slowly dawning awareness that was hitting twenty-two-year-old me resonates with broader dynamics within the Western academy and, in particular, the field of ethnomusicology and the related discipline of anthropology. These disciplines have a troublesome history that parallels my Egyptian experience: White Westerners studying and analytically explaining the “foreign” to people “at home.” Overall, Western explorers and scholars were “discovering” things, places, and lifeways that were new to them but already well known to the “Other” peoples who had invented them. In the West, these novel foreign elements needed to be explained, interpreted, and classified, so anthropologists and ethnomusicologists developed scientific systems and methodologies for doing so. It would take me years after I got back from Cairo to understand two things: first, how the concept of ethnomusicology as a colonialist enterprise could help to explain why White mainline Protestants in America have never been a major subject of ethnomusicological, or by extension anthropological study; and, second, how important it is to American society as a whole that White mainline Protestants *do* become the subject of ethnomusicological and anthropological study.

The first step of wisdom is said to be recognizing that there are things that one does not know, and by the time I returned from Egypt to begin my master’s degree in ethnomusicology, I was beginning to understand how much I did not grasp. I had started feeling subtly uncomfortable presenting myself as an expert on music cultures that were not mine. On the other hand, the apparent counter solution of somehow only allowing people to research their own traditions also seemed like a dangerous tactic that would probably increase racism. I had been taught that being

an outsider to a tradition could sometimes bring types of distance that might be helpful in mitigating an insider's inherently biased views, but an outsider may not understand nuances and cultural details that take a lifetime to sense and understand. Any objectivity was a myth, I decided, as I went off to graduate school.

"The cardinal, the mightiest of the songbirds!" proclaimed the 2003 orientation leader at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, as the school's mascot flew past. The beautiful New England campus offered natural areas full of gorgeous autumn trees that set off a wild mix of architectural styles. To me, though, one of the most striking things about Wesleyan was how the school's secularism and ultraliberal policies (e.g., gender-neutral housing) seemed to contrast with the religious roots reflected in its name. Wesleyan University was named for John Wesley, the father of Methodism, and is among the oldest of the originally Methodist-founded institutions of higher education in the United States. Even in its earliest days, though, Wesleyan was making itself unique: while the Methodist movement undergirded the university's early emphasis on social service and education so much so that Wesleyan's first president, Willbur Fisk, used his inaugural address to declare that education advanced two purposes: "the good of the individual educated and the good of the world," Wesleyan stood apart from many of its historical American peer colleges and universities by offering a liberal arts program rather than theological training.

In contrast, most of America's oldest institutions of higher education were founded to advance Christianity. Colonial-era universities were most frequently founded with motivations similar to those that began my undergraduate alma mater; in 1693, an English royal charter aimed to establish the College of William and Mary as a "perpetual College of Divinity, Philosophy, Languages, and other good Arts and Sciences."<sup>5</sup> In their primary goal of cultivating a learned clergy of White men, colonial educational institutions sought to transfer European values of Christian literacy and learning into the New World. While the distinct focus on training pastors softened over time, the connection between church and academy did not. By 1854, evangelistic Disciples of Christ leader Alexander Campbell was advancing an increasingly popular national view that "colleges and churches go hand in hand in the progress of Christian civilization."<sup>6</sup> Many agreed, and by 1881, 80 percent of the colleges and universities in the United States were church-related private institutions.<sup>7</sup> Over time, higher education has secularized, but those early connections

had an impact through much of the twentieth century and continue to the present day.

By the time I attended, the secular campus culture made it quite clear that Wesleyan University was not church affiliated. I loved the modern hippie vibe and settled into a rigorous MA program. I continued my involvement with Arabic by serving as a teaching assistant for a language course. I worked in the World Music Archives and took classes in South Indian music and Ghanaian drumming. But, I wrote my master's thesis on "my" world: hammered dulcimer communities in the Eastern United States. At the end of my thesis defense, senior ethnomusicologist Mark Slobin (who after a variety of earlier research areas had turned his own scholarly sights on klezmer and Yiddish music) said, "Yes, yes, excellent work. I think we've covered every aspect. Now, I want to know: what is going on in churches? In class, you keep writing about worship conflict in churches. It's very similar to what we are having in our synagogues . . ." We talked for an hour. At the end, he walked over to his bookshelf and pulled down a slim blue book, Charles Etherington's 1962 *Protestant Worship Music: Its History and Practice*. "Take this," he said. "It's the only book I've seen that tries to talk about the lived experience of Christian music in mainline worship from an anthropological perspective. At Indiana, you could start with that, you know, if you wanted to."

Floating out of Slobin's office in 2005 on a cloud of graduate school success, I wondered how this little book could be so unique. I had never formally researched church music, but over forty eventful years had passed since *Protestant Worship Music's* publication. The Catholic Church had undergone rigorous cultural and intellectual introspection during Vatican II. From personal experience, I knew that in Protestant circles, rising evangelicalism and the continuing turn-of-the-millennium Worship Wars had seen Christian publishers spawn scores of books, revised hymnals, expanded worship materials addressing multiculturalism, and countless articles by worship authorities debating music, culture, and the institutionalized church. Between this activity by Christian practitioners and, sometimes overlapping, scholarly productions from musicologists, ethnomusicologists, anthropologists, and sociologists, I could hardly imagine a dearth of academic coverage considering North American mainline Protestant church music within cultural and historical contexts. However, when I started looking for ethnographic resources on mainline Protestantism in the United States, I discovered that Slobin was right: there was nothing.

For my doctoral work at Indiana University, I had planned to write about phenomenology and old-time string band music, but Slobin's questions kept swirling in my head instead. The musical controversies we had discussed at my thesis defense were intensifying. Back in Pennsylvania, the Mennonite church that my parents had finally decided upon suddenly fired both the senior pastor and the music minister over worship style issues. My own Presbyterian church in Indiana had made a series of musically based choices that resulted in their longtime organist quitting under duress. These churches were not unique in their experiences. The Worship Wars were not resolving themselves. Rather, conflicts ostensibly over musical style were flaming smoldering embers that were rooted in far deeper issues than mere sonic tensions. I decided to refocus my dissertation on the Worship Wars in American mainline Protestantism.

The oddity of middle-class White Christianity, and especially mainline Protestantism, as an ethnomusicological topic was quickly made clear to me. I had known that mainline worship was not going to be an exotic doctoral topic (American Presbyterians are so renowned for their staid worship that we are sometimes called "the frozen chosen"), but Indiana's Department of Ethnomusicology and Folklore seemed to be right in line with disciplines that loved studying "vanishing" music cultures. Presbyterianism in the United States was shrinking from being one of the nation's most influential religious cultures to becoming a small minority within the nation's religious landscape. I was hearing guitars (electric and acoustic) displacing pipe organs every Sunday. Projected lyrics were replacing denominational hymnals. Sanctuaries and crosses were being rejected for neutrally decorated fellowship halls and warehouse spaces. My preliminary research had demonstrated that no one had yet ethnographically documented mainline Protestant worship and I wanted to before it was, frankly, too late. I remembered reading a pivotal anthropological paper back when I was an undergraduate at William and Mary. In 1956, Horace Minor had described the Nacirema, an unfamiliar tribe living in North America, "as an example of the extremes to which human behavior can go."<sup>8</sup> Minor analyzed the Nacirema as an anthropologist of the time would have analyzed any newly discovered tribal group, but, in a satirical indictment of the academy's exoticism of "Other" cultures, he had actually subversively described contemporary Americans of the mid-1950s. Nacirema is American spelled backward. Fifty years later, it was time, I thought, to bring a serious ethnographic study of musical conflicts



in mainline Protestantism, or rather, of a major transition in American religious and musical life, to the academic table.

I was, again, wrong. My class cohort was studying “exotic” topics from around the world, from Bali to Nepal to Cuba. In a Music and Religion class where we were supposed to present audio examples from our research, when I played excerpts of Contemporary worship music, the other students and the professor burst into laughter. “Oh, wow, it’s like ’80s pop karaoke, but somehow even worse!” As my colleagues made fun of both the music and the people making it, I was balancing a sense of personal insult (after all these months of talking about our projects, how didn’t they respect that this was my immediate family’s religious tradition?) and shock that the guise of professional objectivity could fall off so quickly when faced with something “at home.” In his study of evangelical Christian music, Jewish sociologist Ari Kelman writes about encountering a similar disconnect within the academy:

My academic colleagues, who were not concerned with my faith, as they assumed that I did not have much . . . were concerned with the withering effects they believed that worship music might have on it. Working primarily in secular, research universities, some of my colleagues are scholars of music and others are scholars of religion, and their inquiries betrayed some shared assumptions . . .<sup>9</sup>

My classmates seemed to share similar assumptions about musical and spiritual quality with both Kelman’s colleagues and scholars at most Western colleges and universities: studying modern, White middle-class Christian worship music in America was at best unnecessary for—and at worst subversive to—the goals of an objective, secular, diverse, and liberal academy.

Opposition to analyzing mainline Protestants’ lived experience of sacred musicking<sup>10</sup> extended into the all-important realm of graduate funding. My department’s director of graduate studies told me that securing external sources for my dissertation research and writing would likely be nearly impossible: “Good luck, but no one is interested in funding the study of sacred or religious music, especially church music.” He was a scholar of myth, so I wrote off his comments as ironically funny until they seemed to prove true. With the exception of one generous grant from the

Presbyterian-linked Louisville Foundation, I could not get external funding. In terms of quality, my work was on par with my cohort of fellow students, but as I hit paywall after paywall, I started to understand the centuries of academic history that had built this funding infrastructure. My work was attempting to analyze—not advance—Christianity, so most religiously based funding sources were not suitable. Ethnomusicological and anthropological sources balked at the seeming establishmentarianism of the study. These disciplines, often rightly, tend to lambast the harm that Western colonialist and missionary interventions have done to local cultures around the world. How, they asked me, could I want to study the religious communities who were responsible for this history of colonialism and oppression without vilifying Presbyterians as cultural destroyers? Was I trying to glorify this cultural meddling? Wasn't I a Presbyterian myself? Was my work self-servingly promoting White supremacy?

No, absolutely not.

White mainline Protestants in America have generally not been the subject of ethnographic research because their practices have been considered the normal default to which the “ethnic” is compared. “If you were in charge of something big before 1960,” notes religious historian David Hollinger, “chances are you grew up in a white Protestant milieu.”<sup>11</sup> Just as comparative musicology and early ethnomusicology compared the “Others” to the West, and even as the academy has secularized, underlying assumptions of WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) normalcy and cultural hegemony have prevailed. “We,” the liberalized WASPs of the Western academy, have been studied through qualitative sociological means (which assume levels of cultural familiarity with the subjects of study) but have not been subjected to the substantive ethnographic methods that we have been applying to the rest of the world. This is because “we” have been operating from the assumption of “us” as the racial, religious, and cultural default. “We” have been so normal that “we” are well understood and do not need to be studied.

But this is not true.

A lack of understanding about how the long-hegemonic racial and religious majority of the United States experiences itself—and particularly how it experiences itself while slowly slipping from that dominant position—holds broad implications for American society. As I write this in the summer of 2020, the nation is undergoing an unprecedented period of progressive change. Historian Ibram Kendi has recently asserted that “the only way to undo racism is to consistently identify and describe it—

and then dismantle it.”<sup>12</sup> I am not alleging that mainline Protestantism or the academy have been purposefully racist . . . but, as one of the White Presbyterians in my dissertation research said about her predominantly White church, “it sure would be nice if we had more Black people.” By studying White mainline Protestants through the same lenses normally applied to “Other” people, *(White)Washing Our Sins Away* contributes to an antiracist cultural shift. It has taken over ten years, expanded research, more international experience, and this cultural shift in America until, finally, this book’s time has come.

*(White)Washing Our Sins Away* certainly aims to provide White mainline Protestants’ insight of ourselves, but the book also reaches much farther. *(White)Washing* holds relevance for anyone who has involvement with such Christianity—both as manifested in individuals and in the cultural and education systems central to the United States.