

Gospel festivals and tourism: disrupting the boundaries between the sacred and the profane?

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Gospel Festivals

- Contemporary, commercial festivals inspired and influenced by Christianity (largely those of evangelical faiths), which seek to incorporate festivity (largely expressed through music), fellowship (amongst the community of Christians) and evangelism (preaching the gospel or Good News to the unsaved)
- Gospel festivals provide an opportunity for social interaction amongst Christians (its predominant audience), affirmation of faith, as well as entailing an evangelical fervour for any 'unsaved' who attend

Gospel Festivals

- Many of these festivals target both local and international audiences
- Most are supported/sponsored by local or national tourism authorities

Major gospel festivals



Gospel Festival Tourism

- **‘Gospel festival tourism’** is a contemporary phenomenon which demonstrates the interrelationship between predominantly music festivals, religion (specifically evangelical Christianity) and tourism

Gospel Festivals

- Music is at the heart of gospel festivals although there are often other events (e.g. games, dance, ministry)
- Historically, the 'origins' of gospel music can be traced back to the British and European folk song tradition which was taken to America in the 17th and 18th centuries
- However, these songs were modified by Black Americans to reflect their experience of slavery (mixed with forms such as the blues, jazz and ragtime) and were heavily influenced by the rise of the Holiness or Pentecostal Churches in the 19th century (Cusic, 1990)
- Primary religious underpinning but also an important socio-cultural aspect to gospel music

What is gospel music?

- Gospel music described as:
 - Music with Christian theological ideas and popular appeal (Chitando, 2002)
 - A distinct kind of music composed and rendered by men and women who call themselves Christians and who refer to their music as ‘ministration of the Good News in songs.’ (Ojo, 1998:211)
 - Religion with rhythm (Darden, 2004)

Gospel Music

- Within some gospel music there is an explicit rejection of traditional religious beliefs and practices as demonic/of the devil with an advocacy to embrace more 'enlightened' Christian beliefs and practices.
- Therefore, it is Christian messages that are being transmitted to local and international audiences through the medium of these festivals
- These Christian messages are infused with popular cultural expressions

‘Dancehall Gospel’...

- Minister Goddy Goddy – Obeah Man Poppy Show.
- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JKBhkjO59yA>

Gospel Music

■ ***Gospel music catches worldly riddim***

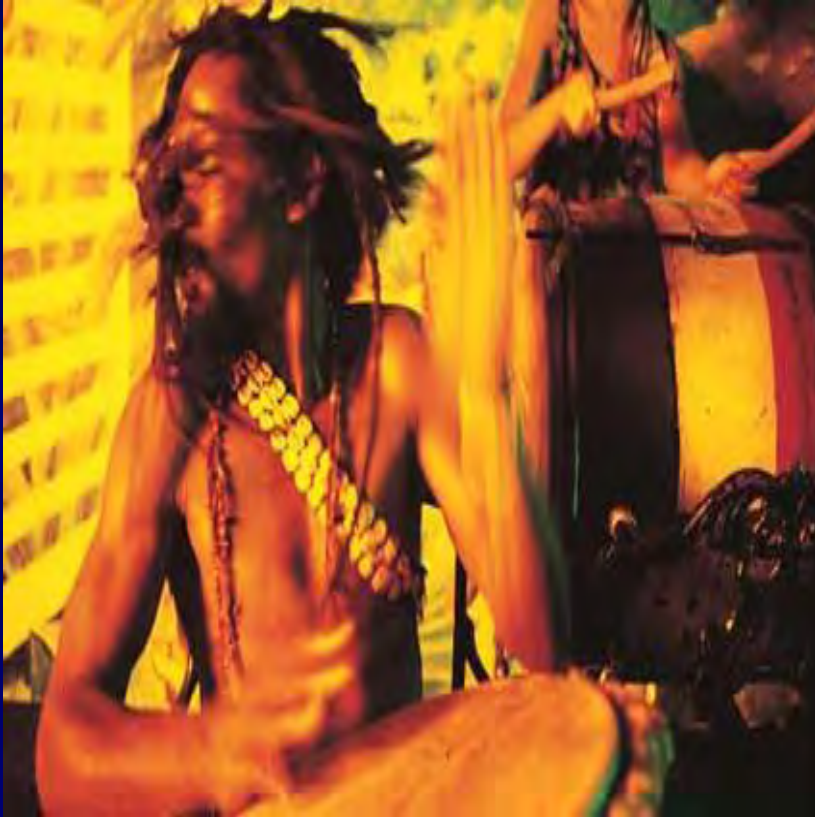
- *With gospel artistes singing and deejaying on dancehall rhythms, the Christian arena is seen to be treading a thin line between the faith and secular music industry. To the minds of most, dancehall music is less than holy in content, beat, culture and expression.*

■ Jamaica Gleaner, November 18, 2007

Questions

- Have these gospel festivals become so commercialised, so reflective of popular 'secular' culture that they now blur the boundary between the sacred and the profane?
- How does tourism add further complexity to this issue?

Case Study - Jamaica



Case Study - Jamaica

- *‘Church welcomes religious tourism’*
 - *Minister of Tourism, Edmund Bartlett, on Monday, said he would be working towards formalising a structure for the faith-based tourism sector to meet the increasing global need for its services.*
 - Jamaica Gleaner, February 1, 2008

Case Study - Jamaica

- ***Religion new Jamaican tourism lure; fun in the Sun gospel festival joins fun in the sun.***
 - *This tropical isle has long marketed its beaches, waterfalls, foliage and water sports to tourists from around the world. Now it's marketing a hidden resource: religion. But it's not Rastafarianism...instead the Jamaica Tourism (sic) Board is trying to interest evangelical and charismatic Christian groups to visit the island...*
 - Washington Times, April, 2006

Fun in the Sun

- Started in 2002 it takes place during Spring Break in Jamaica (March) and conceptualised as an alternative specifically to the hedonism of the Spring Break product and a desire to highlight the 'religious side' of Jamaica.
- Spring break known as an 'American college ritual known for extreme behaviour – casual sex, excessive drinking and drug taking...popular spring break destinations are known for their perpetual party atmosphere, high alcohol consumption and sexually suggestive contests or displays (Mattila et al, 2001: 197)

Fun in the Son

- Dubbed 'The Premier Christian Festival in the Caribbean'. This Christian festival transforms the **exotic** destination of Ocho Rios for one weekend of **hot** Christian Entertainment and Ministry! The festival kicks off with a massive street **evangelism outreach** in the centre of Ocho Rios before hosting the power-packed two-day Word and Worship Conference. Thousands of Christian youths cannot afford to miss the youth '**Crossover**' party and the international Fun in the Son gospel concert.

■ www.onecaribbean.org



Fun in the Son

- A highlight is the Street **Jam** when thousands of people gather at night in the square at Ocho Rios to dance, sing, clap and enjoy the fervour of the festivities, followed by preaching. There is late night dancing where born-again DJs **spin the latest gospel sounds**. Some of Jamaica's best Christian artists also make live stage appearances.



Fun in the Son

- The Gospel festival, like tourism is a temporary occurrence that takes place within a liminal space where Christians are encouraged to 'let go' and perhaps behave in ways which would not normally be sanctioned within the confines of the formal church building.
- There is also, within the gospel music of these festivals, a reflection and reinforcement of 'secular' (profane) popular culture.
- Promoting these events as tourism products adds further complexity as...

Gospel festivals and tourism

- A tourist journey (is) a hedonistic invitation to man (and) often leads a believer into temptation (Vukonic 1996:108)
- Tourism is, to a certain extent, a threat to faith, because tourists “in giving themselves over to worldly pleasures forget their religious needs and duties” (Giovanni Arrighi cited in Vukonic, 1996:113)

Gospel Festivals and tourism

- Given the transience or temporality of liminal spaces, do they have any transformative power?
- Does the contemporary gospel festival also represent a site of resistance where new forms of Christian worship and celebration have emerged to challenge traditional Christian discourses and practices?
- The liminal space is a *kind of institutionalised capsule or pocket which contains the germ of future social developments, of social change*' (Turner, 1982:45).

Final Thought...

■ *The sacred and the profane*

- *Are both necessary for the evolution of life – one, as the environment within which life unfolds; the other, as the inexhaustible source that creates, sustains, and renews it.*

(Caillois, 2001: 22)

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