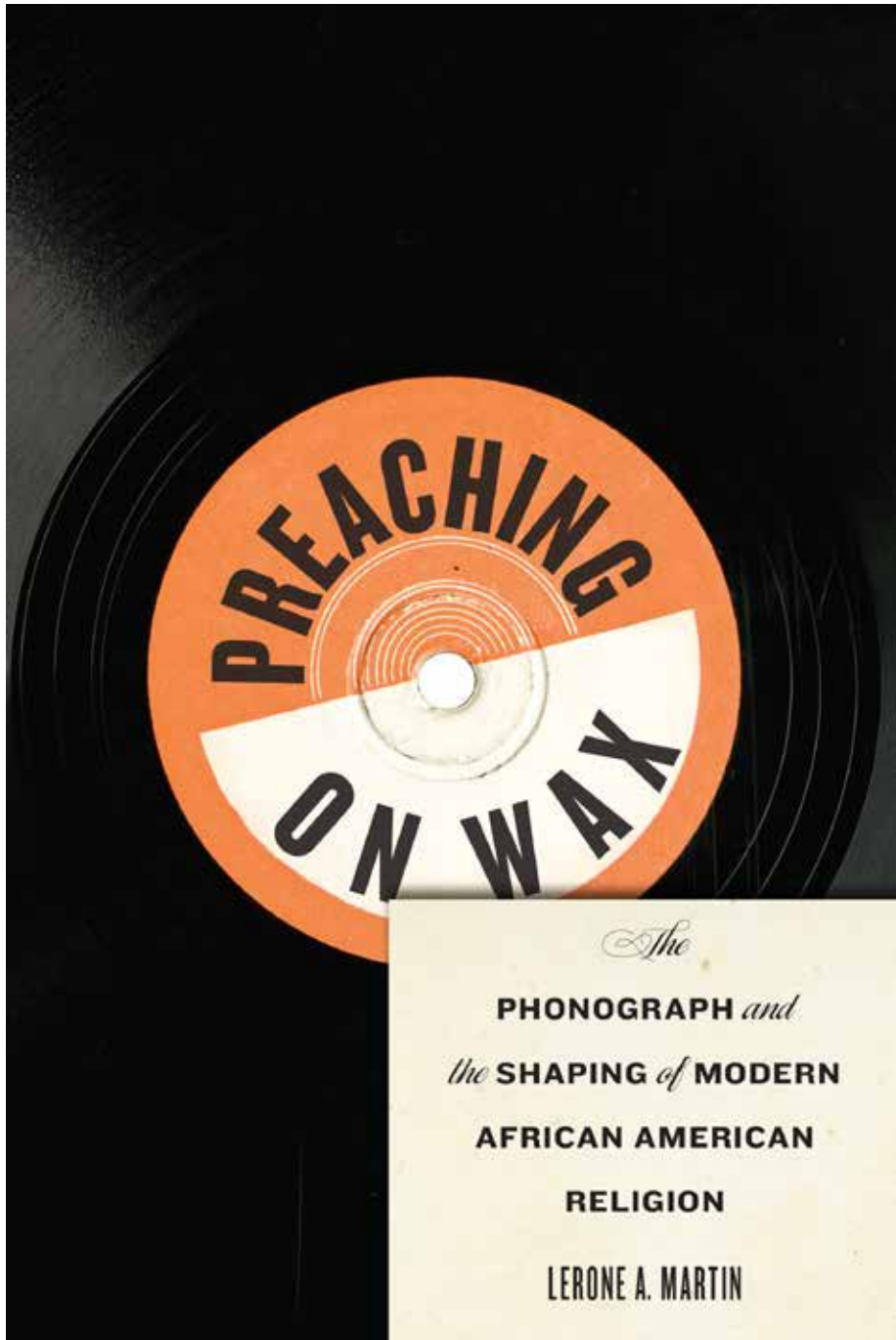


PREACHING ON WAX

INSTRUCTOR'S GUIDE



Preaching on Wax provides scholars, students, religious adherents, and casual observers of twentieth century U.S. history and religion an engaging and new history of the rise of religious broadcasting, celebrity, and commodification in the U.S. In an easy to follow and gripping narrative, the book follows the development of the phonograph as a primary entertainment medium and the subsequent rise and prominence of recorded sermons in America. Readers will learn how competing views of the proper relationship of the church to the rising entertainment market of the 1920s deeply shaped religion in America. Moreover, the book displays how large corporations such as Columbia, Paramount, and RCA became very influential in Protestant preaching. Furthermore, readers will gain a better understanding of how the consumer culture of the Roaring Twenties, namely the rise of chains stores such as JC Penny, Sears, and Montgomery Ward, came to dominate the marketing and selling of religious commodities in America.

This story comes to life as the majority of the sermons are available on YouTube (links provided). This book then, enables an engagement of multiple senses and thus proves to be a pedagogical tool for easy and fruitful instruction.

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SUMMARY:

The introduction begins with the rise of Reverend James M. Gates from local migrant preacher to celebrity religious broadcaster. The brief narrative serves to show that the phonograph industry, African American clergy, and notable consumer corporations significantly contributed to the modern formation of religion in twentieth century America. However, this phenomenon of “phonograph religion” has largely been missing from accounts of religion in the twentieth century US. In addition to a chapter outline, the introduction places phonograph religion in broader historical context.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. What is phonograph religion?

SUMMARY:

This chapter relies on the voices of consumers, advertisers, and magazines and journals such as *The Talking Machine World* (the leading phonograph magazine) to highlight the ways in which the talking machine altered American life. Originally the phonograph was a public amusement device. However, it eventually became the primary home entertainment medium for music, comedy, speeches, letters, news, books, family records, children's stories, sermons, and even advertising. The chapter then offers a broad look at the prominent role of the phonograph in American life and culture during the early twentieth century.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. In what ways did the phonograph change life in America? Shopping? Advertising? Marketing? Campaigning? Religion?
2. How did Americans feel about their phonographs?
3. Are there any contemporary technological parallels that compare to how the talking machine changed American life?

ASSIGNMENT/CLASS EXERCISES:

Issues of *The Talking Machine World* from 1905 (the very first issue), 1923, and 1928 can be viewed and downloaded here:

1905: <https://archive.org/details/TheTalkingMachineWord1905Volume1>

1923: <https://archive.org/details/talkingmachinew19bill>

1928: <https://archive.org/details/talkingmachinewo24bill>

Suggest students browse the magazine to identify advertisements, images, and personal letters—and then share their findings. This exercise will provide students with further insight into the significance of the phonograph in American life. Such dialogue will prove generative in understanding the phenomenon that was the phonograph.

SUMMARY:

This chapter chronicles the rise of race records—black popular music recorded by and for African Americans—and how black faith communities responded. The overwhelming popularity of blues artists and their sometimes risqué recorded tales rivaled the church for the time, money and cultural authority of black communities. Race records, then were viewed as a primary hindrance to racial uplift and Christian faith. Some Black mainline churches responded by reprioritizing church work by making faith communities alternative venues of entertainment and amusement that could compete for the allegiance and patronage of black consumers. Others insisted that under no circumstances should the church be engaged in the amusement market. The entertainment industry, they argued, was best left in the hands of professional and educated race men such as Harry Pace, WEB Du Bois, and their *Black Swan* record label. The chapter outlines and assesses the shortcomings of these “sacred” responses to race records.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. What effects did race records have upon white Americans? Black Americans? Corporate America?
2. Why were churches so concerned about race records? In what ways did they respond?
3. Do you agree with Lacy Kirk Williams concerning the role of the church in commercial amusement? What about Du Bois?

ASSIGNMENTS/CLASS EXERCISES:

1. Watch Bessie Smith in the fifteen-minute music video/short film Saint Louis Blues. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kTXBZFvFXdA>

This is Smith’s only known appearance on film. Discuss the film. What jumps out to you? How might faith communities view this film in light of notions of respectability? Racial uplift?

2. Listen to Ma’ Rainey’s *Prove it on Me Blues* and actual newspaper advertisement for the record: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ILCso6BMGUo>

Lyrics here: <http://www.gugalyrics.com/lyrics-1653626/ma-rainey-prove-it-on-me.html>

What is Ma Rainey singing about? How might this offend black faith communities?

3. Discuss **Figure 2.1**. What stands out in this cartoon? What does it communicate concerning the expected role of black faith communities in light of the rise of race records?

SUMMARY:

Chapter 3 follows the careers of Black Billy Sunday and Reverend William White, the first black preachers to record on wax, to narrate the rise of phonograph sermons. The ideologies of competing and/or ignoring the phonograph industry largely failed. Evangelical black clergy, in turn, responded by joining the phonograph industry and recording their stately sermons on wax. Their response to race records was steeped in the time-honored practice of American evangelicalism: duplicating and utilizing forms of popular entertainment and communication as a means of proselytization and religious revitalization. The phonograph, in their eyes, was a utensil of church work. The chapter follows the theologically astute sermons as they are preached, recorded, manufactured, transported, advertised, and sold across the country via mail-order, department chain stores, confectionaries, record shops, and country stores.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. Why did black preachers decide to team up with the phonograph industry?
2. Why did record labels decide to record black preachers?
3. How were recorded sermons marketed and advertised?
4. How and where were recorded sermons sold?

ASSIGNMENT/CLASS EXERCISES:

1. Sample Black Billy Sunday's sermon, "As an Eagle Stirreth Her Nest" on Document Records album, *Preachers and Congregations Vol.3* via iTunes.

What do you notice about this sermon? Listen the first time for style and the second time for content. Discuss the sermon style and content and their respective relationship to race records?

2. Listen to Reverend White's sermon, "Divine Relationship of Man to God," on Document Records album, *Preachers and Congregations Vol.7* via iTunes. What do you notice about this sermon? Listen the first time for style and the second time for content. Discuss the sermon style and content and their respective relationship to race records?
3. Discuss **Figure 3.1** and **Figure 3.2**. What draws your attention? What is the ad attempting to convey to 1920's consumers?
4. Discuss **Figure 3.3**. What draws your attention? What is the ad attempting to

CHAPTER 3
SELLING TO THE SOULS OF
BLACK FOLK

convey to 1920's consumers?

5. Why do you think the sermons struggle in the market?

SUMMARY:

This chapter chronicles how preaching on wax became extremely popular and lucrative when phonograph preachers eschewed urbane and didactic sermons in favor of the folk chanted sermon. The chapter follows Reverends Gates, McGee, and a host others detailing how their channeling of the linguistic folk style of race records into the studio pulpit yielded record breaking sells and profits for preachers and record labels alike. Moreover, the chapter details how preaching on wax was gendered as preachers, labels, and consumers largely ignored female phonograph preachers. The chapter closes by displaying how these apostles of modernity carved out a lasting blueprint for popular black religious broadcasting.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. How did Reverend Gates sermons compare to his predecessors?
2. How did electronic recording change sermon recordings?
3. Compare Reverend Gates preaching to Reverend McGee and Reverend Ross. How were they similar? How were they different?
4. What role did sexism play in the early days of religious broadcasting?

ASSIGNMENTS/CLASSROOM EXERCISES:

1. Listen to Reverend Gates's sermons:

https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=J.M.+Gates

How do they compare to Reverend McGee?

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Fk1XZQwTao&index=4&list=PL-b_1FQKT-TYe9QNvZG0agbcusRid6WGp5

2. Listen to Reverend Ross's sermon:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ebVn-e1rM04>

How does she compare to her male counterparts?

3. Discuss and compare the advertisements found in **Figures 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3**. How are they alike? How are they different? What are they attempting to convey? How are they attempting to reach/convince consumers?

SUMMARY:

This chapter offers a case study on black religious authority and the rise of the commercial celebrity preacher in the twentieth century. The phonograph industry transfigured Reverend Gates into a commercial star, established and molded in the black celebrity culture of the era. The chapter pays particular attention to how this new celebrity preacher derived his authority not from the world of letters and elite black institutions and organizations, but from the commercial marketplace and the social mobility associated with commercial celebrity. Black professionals and literati chose their leading clergy such as Adam Clayton Powell Sr., according to their own rubric, while the black consumer marketplace anointed its own clergy of renown. Much has been written about the former, little about the latter. Reverend James Gates is emblematic of this understudied tradition. He became a preacher for the New Negro Era by patterning his ministry and lifestyle not after black professionals, but after the “intelligentsia” of the marketplace: black commercial celebrities.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. What was the “New Negro Era?”
2. How did the New Negro Era shape religious leadership?
3. What are the ways in which the author defines “New Negro Clergy”
4. Why did some black clergy pursue celebrity?
5. How did commercial celebrity alter Christianity in America?

ASSIGNMENT/CLASSROOM EXERCISE:

1. Discuss **Figure 5.1**. What does this ad say about what the record industry expected from sales of Reverend Gates sermons? What does it say about clergy as celebrity?
2. Has this celebrity tradition continued today? Search the Internet, television, magazines, and newspapers for contemporary images of celebrity preachers. How does this compare to Reverend Gates celebrity image?
3. **Discuss Figure 5.2**. What was so important and significant about driving a nice car as an African American? A black preacher?

SUMMARY:

The final chapter examines the relationship between recorded sermons and dominant notions of race, class, and gender. The spotlight is placed on Reverend Gates's 1930 sermon "Say Goodbye to Chain Stores." Chain stores and their mail order catalogs were the primary retail outlets for phonographs and recorded sermons. Chains made phonograph religion a national phenomenon, even as it made Reverend Gates a celebrity. However, in his 1930 sermon he vigorously criticized chain stores for what he saw as their all too apparent detrimental effect upon the nation's working classes. Reverend Gates promoted consumer culture through phonograph religion even as he used phonograph religion to critique it. The paradox was not lost upon Okeh Records or its chain store partners. Executives of the Columbia-owned company made sure the anti-chain store homily recorded that day in April 1930 never made it to the marketplace or into the hands of consumers. The chapter then reveals how the market and corporate retail simultaneously amplified and attenuated black religious broadcasters' ability to address certain issues of inequality.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. Why did chain stores encounter so much opposition?
2. What, in your opinion, were the positive/advantages to corporate commerce? Negatives/disadvantages?
3. Who benefited from the rise of chain stores? Who experienced chain stores as a detriment?
4. Why did Okeh Records choose not to sell Reverend Gates sermon?
5. How did cooperate retail bolster clerical authority? How did it limit clerical authority?

ASSIGNMENTS/CLASSROOM EXERCISES:

1. Discuss **Figure 6.1**. What is the political cartoon saying about chain stores? The relationship between chain stores and local communities? Churches?
2. Sample Reverend Gates sermon, "Goodbye to Chain Stores, Parts 1 and 2" on the album, *Are You Bound For Heaven Or Hell? The Best Of Reverend J.M. Gates* via iTunes or Amazon. How does Reverend Gates sermon and accompanying song coincide with **Figure 6.1**?

3. Look for contemporary protests against chain stores on the Internet, magazines, and or newspapers. How are these protest similar and/or different from Reverend Gates? Is religion playing a vital role in these protests?

CHAPTER 6

"SAY GOODBYE TO CHAIN STORES"

SUMMARY:

The concluding chapter offers an overview of the book's key arguments. It closes with an assessment of where and how "phonograph religion" has taken shape since 1945.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. How successful, in the end, do you think phonograph preachers were?
2. What is the proper rubric for success when evaluating church work?
3. What are the possibilities and limits of modeling church work after popular entertainment? The commercial marketplace?

ASSIGNMENTS/CLASSROOM EXERCISES:

1. Search various media for the answer to this question: Who are today's phonograph preachers? Explain your findings. What are the differences, similarities between then and now?

ADDITIONAL ONLINE RESOURCES:

Allen Sutton, Resources for Phonograph Collectors and Researchers,
<http://www.mainspringpress.com>

Measures of Worth, "Understanding the value of money in the past and today,"
<http://www.measuringworth.com/index.php>

U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics Consumer Price Index
Inflation Calculator, <http://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl>

The Online Discographical Project, ed. Steve Abrams and Tyrone Settlemier,
<http://www.78discography.com>

The Star and Gennet Record Story, <http://www.stargennett.org>

The David Sarnoff Phonograph and Radio Library at Princeton,
<http://www.davidsarnoff.org>

Digitized sermons for purchase, <http://www.document-records.com>