

Last Night a DJ Saved My Life: The Theo-Rhetorical Significance of Club Quarantine

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The search for the sacred is often intensified during times of crisis. There have been varied rhetorical responses during the COVID-19 crisis in the Black community, with much of them initiating from within the church. The sacred/secular dichotomy has created difficulty for some churches to adapt virtually. Despite this tension, fresh theo-rhetorical moments are emerging that are not necessarily occurring within the church. Compelling events on social media have created community and healing, warranting a scholarly examination from a theo-rhetorical perspective.

In this essay, we attempt to do this by offering an examination of DJ D-Nice's Club Quarantine on Instagram. Drawing upon sources from rhetorical theology and theomusicology, we argue that Club Quarantine creates a virtual space that reframes both sacred and secular. Moreover, by understanding the rhetorical dynamics of DJ D-Nice's performance, we also maintain that Club Quarantine blurs that sacred/secular divide by providing its own unique brand of holiness that spoke to many while dealing with quarantine and stay at home orders.

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The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 has created a challenge for many aspects of American life. Communities of faith in general and the Black church, in particular, had to rethink weekly engagement and worship formats during a time of social distancing. In a short period, the church had to reimagine worship and congregational engagement. One can argue that this moment of crisis brought about by a highly contagious virus that has shut down the economy and threatened life and limb has forced churches to reevaluate their mission. One may also argue that this moment has caused individuals to search for hope and reassurance in unprecedented ways, calling for a creative and authentic theo-rhetorical response.

Personally, (Moya) as both nurse and clergy during this epidemic, my viewpoint has been multifaceted. As a clinician, I have experienced the pandemic, facing my own mortality while conserving personal protective equipment. I worry that I will bring the dreaded virus home, infecting my family. I have gathered the numerous prayer requests, spoken with church members distraught because they have lost loved ones. I have seen the continuation of health disparities in black and brown communities during a pandemic. The toll of knowing the gravity of the situation from a clinical perspective, having to actually change clinical practice because of an unseen enemy

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that is indiscriminating and relentless, facing the reality of having to go head-first into this situation, and not knowing if we will have adequate personal protective equipment while trying to save lives began to take a toll.

I will admit that there have been moments in which I became paralyzed, frightened for my own life and the lives of those whom I love. There were times where virtual church and virtual sermons were not a healing balm. I felt conflicted because I didn't feel my help coming from these spaces as a preacher. I needed an authentic theological and rhetorical space in this moment of crisis. I was searching for a word that would give me hope and joy in the midst of death and uncertainty, and for me, it wasn't always found in a virtual church. I sought a different sacred encounter to connect authentically with God and other human beings. My soul was yearning for a space where I could be free to laugh, cry, and exist amid this crisis. I needed a sermon that would bring me hope and joy, giving me the ability to hold on amid uncertainty; in many instances, I was left wanting more.

However, despite this tension in the midst of crisis, we argue that fresh rhetorical moments are emerging that have provided glimpses of God's hope and joy. Virtual DJ sessions on social media have emerged, creating in some instances community and spaces of healing which, we believe, warrants a scholarly examination from a theo-rhetorical perspective. In particular, as created by DJ Derrick Jones, professionally known as D-Nice, Club Quarantine has created what we would call a sacred space on Instagram. In a virtual space, night after night, D-Nice played music that safely connected up to 150 thousand people in one night virtually over the internet, transcending time and space.

In this sacred space, many found community, joy, and love. It is from this perspective that we dare to proclaim that a "DJ saved [our] life." D-Nice was the preacher, and we were among a congregation of people seeking some sense of normalcy in a constantly changing world. Therefore, because of Club Quarantine's communal and sacred nature, we have chosen to examine its theo-rhetorical significance during the COVID-19 pandemic. This sacred space used the rhetoric of music to spread messages of hope, love, and resilience to create a safe space that created a community in the midst of sheltering in place. This space became a church and D-Nice became the preacher.

In analyzing the phenomenon of Club Quarantine, we draw upon Andre E. Johnson's use of rhetorical theology. Moreover, noting how this is applicable in this context, we also draw upon the field of theomusicology, which fleshes out the notion of the realms of the sacred, secular, and profane, and discuss the nature of the DJ or disc jockey in hip hop and pop culture. We also aim to demonstrate that there is no separation between the sacred and the secular in Black culture. Even further, we suggest that an understanding of rhetorical theology and theomusicology produces a unique theo-rhetorical discourse that helps us understand how one would view Club Quarantine as sacred.

Rhetorical Theology

Andre E. Johnson states that "rhetorical theology is attentive to the ways an audience, within a particular context, is persuaded or moved to act."¹ He goes on to say that "all theology is at its core argument; an argument that seeks to persuade its hearers to a certain position."² In other words, how we speak about God, how we articulate our faith, and how we attempt to persuade others

¹ Andre E. Johnson, "The Prophetic Persona of James Cone and the Rhetorical Theology of Black Theology," *Black Theology* 8, no. 3 (2010): 282.

² Johnson, 282.

about the things of God is in itself rhetorical. Johnson is clear that rhetorical theology is more practically based than theory; it is focused on the actual implementation or acting out of theology and infers that theory can be derived from method. Johnson maintains that theory comes to the rhetorical task seeking guidance and understanding from the text, rather than imposing theoretical concepts upon the text.³ In the instance of the rhetorical moment of Club Quarantine, we argue that the music becomes the text. The music itself takes on the rhetorical task that guides the listeners towards community and understanding. The music takes on the work of a text in this rhetorical moment.

In his article that introduces rhetorical theology, Johnson argues that rhetoric gives us a glimpse of the discourse's context. He writes that "rhetorical criticism at its best is a study of the language that came from a particular context in which a speaker/writer felt a need to respond." It is also a study of how the rhetor invites the audience to respond. What rhetorical theology is not, Johnson claims, is a study on how audiences actually respond. Thus, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, we believe that it is important to take the time to evaluate what rhetors are saying and the intended audience response.

In applying this theory where the rhetor's message is a response to a contextual situation, Club Quarantine can be seen as an unorthodox response to the perpetual fear and doom that permeates cable news, social media, and the lives of most Americans. D-Nice's use of music that transcends age-group, gender, class, and race consistently encouraged thousands of people to stay home amid the pandemic. This in of itself was life-giving. One can also argue that it was also a form of resistance.

Theomusicology and The Sacred/Secular Dichotomy

Jon Michael Spencer maintains that "by examining the depths of sacrality, secularity, and profanity in the music of civilization's many cultures, the theomusicologist can increasingly discern how particular peoples perceive universal mysteries that circumscribe their mortal existence and how the ethics, theologies, and mythologies to which they subscribe shape their worlds and *the* world."⁴

Theomusicology as a methodology surmises that the "religious symbols, myths, and canon of the culture being studied are the theomusicologist's authoritative/normative sources."⁵ Spencer gives the example of interpreting the healing of biblical patriarch Saul via David's lyre. Western music therapists would account for the healing as psychological, while the theomusicologist would first consider the culture's religious beliefs. The key here is that what is deemed sacred within a culture must be determined. As Spencer so aptly states, theomusicology is needed because it "is able to recognize aspects of sacrality in the sphere and the music of the secular."⁶

Spencer states that the theomusicological method is "one that allows for scientific analysis," but primarily resides within the guardrails of the norms found in the ethics, religion, or mythology of the community of believers being studied."⁷ There are three analytical approaches to theomusicology: *descriptive*, *normative*, and *predictive*. *Descriptive theomusicology* describes the creators

³ Ibid.

⁴ Spencer, *Theological Music*.

⁵ Spencer, 3.

⁶ Spencer, 12.

⁷ Spencer, 4.

and the consumers of music from a non-judgmental perspective. *Normative theomusicology* examines the same in comparison to “tenets of canonical authority.”⁸ *Predictive theomusicology* is an “analysis of the future state of affairs to which music speaks or directs a society.”⁹ For the purpose of this essay, we will employ descriptive theomusicology as a non-judgmental analysis that is not bound to religious tenets or dogma is something that we believe should be avoided, especially in this particular context. Spencer argues that the analytical paradigm for theomusicology should begin with a descriptive analysis followed by normative, and lastly, a predictive critique.

We submit that theomusicology is an excellent methodology to analyze Black music, especially from a descriptive perspective. As Spencer notes, “employing music as a means of intellectual inquiry into the theology of American popular culture can be pivotal and prophetic scholarship.”¹⁰ This methodology provides a means to look at Club Quarantine to understand the current culture theologically. N. Lynne Westfield and Harold Dean Trulear, in their article “Theomusicology and Christian Education: Spirituality and The Ethics of Control in the Rap of MC Hammer,” state:

Theomusicology treats black music in a holistic manner and secularity as a context for the sacred and profane rather than as the antithesis of the sacred... As such, theomusicology is a tool for us to move beyond the simplistic notions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ that are uncritically used to characterize black secular music and especially rap music, and to help us develop an understanding of the meaning system under construction by African American youths.¹¹

To further enter into this particular conversation, one school of thought acknowledges a tension between the sacred and the secular within the Black community and in Western-European circles. However, some scholars argue that there is no separation between sacred and secular realms, especially in Black music. Teresa L. Reed claims that this dichotomy is relatively new in African American culture despite the joint tension previously mentioned.

In the introduction of her book *The Holy Profane: Religion in Black Popular Music*, Reed discusses the origins of African American culture in West Africa. Upon the arrival of enslaved Africans on the shores of North America, a category of “non-religious” music did not exist. Western culture eventually introduced this notion of the sacred/secular dichotomy into musical thought. Reed says that while this phenomenon occurred, Blacks in America still held on to the most powerful elements of their African musicality, thereby forming a rich hybrid consciousness that created a uniquely African American approach to the sacred/secular distinction. She connects this lack of a sacred/secular dichotomy with West African religion, which permeates the culture.

West African culture is no delineation or distinction between religion and other aspects of human existence¹², unlike the distinct separation in Western European culture. This is paralleled in both cultures’ approaches to music. “In the West, music and the other arts are often approached as objects detached from human experience yet intended for human contemplation and consumption... By contrast, traditional West Africans fuse music with everyday life in much the same way

⁸ Spencer, 4.

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ Spencer, *Theological Music*, 13.

¹¹ N. Lynne Westfield and Harold Dean Trulear, “Theomusicology and Christian Education: Spirituality and the Ethics of Control in the Rap of Hammer,” *Black Sacred Music* 8, no. 1 (1994): 219–20.

¹² Teresa L Reed, *The Holy Profane: Religion in Black Popular Music* (The University Press of Kentucky, 2003) Introduction.

that they fuse the divine with everyday life.”¹³ She notes that music and religion are “inextricably bound together in West-African culture, so much so that it is impossible to imagine one without the other.”¹⁴

Reed writes that music’s function in African religious rituals facilitates communication in the spiritual realm. The ritualistic life is deeply steeped in music and dancing and is essential to *Vodou*, “a complex system of symbols, magic, beliefs, and ceremonies found in West Africa.”¹⁵ *Vodou* traditions and rituals were transported to the Americas and Caribbean via the slave trade, surviving the cruel slave ships that sought to terminate African culture for the sake of domination and commerce. A syncretized version of *Vodou*, influenced by Western culture and Roman Catholicism, still exists but remains essentially a West-African religious form that acknowledges the powers and energies that permeate and emanate from all things. This paragraph explains the nature of the West-African worldview succinctly:

In the West-African worldview, music is intrinsically spiritual, the sacred is intrinsically musical, and both music and the divine permeate every imaginable part of life. “Scholars seem to agree,” says Samuel Floyd, “that aim of African music has always been to translate the experiences of life and of the spiritual world into sound, enhancing and celebrating life through cradle songs, song of reflection, historical songs, fertility songs, songs about death and mourning, and other song varieties.” It is this conceptual approach to spirituality, coupled with this approach to music, that Africans brought with them to the New World.¹⁶

This worldview has had a lasting effect on African American culture that has transcended generation and genre. As European culture has erected an unyielding partition between the sacred and the profane, this partition is nebulous in Black culture, according to Spencer. The European notion of sacred is incapable of covering the span of music sacred to the Black experience but not necessarily spiritual in nature. Although hymnologist Wendell Whalum probably would not include Black music genres such as the blues or rap in his claim that “black hymnody, categorically speaking, must include all serious music that is sacred to the black experience,” his assessment also left out civil rights songs and antislavery songs that are not biblically based.¹⁷ Spencer, in his work, expands what he believes should be included in the sacred works of Black hymnody, maintaining that those previously listed genres are indeed considered sacred to scores of Black people. We must reiterate that theomusicology allows for the impartial and nonjudgmental examination of music that, in other areas of theology, would be deemed secular or, at worst, profane and lacking in the things of God.

We suggest that Black music, whether Rhythm and Blues, Gospel, Hip hop, or Jazz is sacred. We argue that the songs of Donny Hathaway, Stevie Wonder, Aretha Franklin, Sister Sledge, and A Tribe Called Quest and Kendrick Lamar can all be considered sacred. The songs from these artists and others like them, depending upon the context in which they are heard, can transport and invoke memories and emotions. The soundtracks of our childhoods, weaving messages of love and hope and joy, connect a people to days long gone. Many of these rhythmic songs have an ancestral reality that can heal broken hearts and give glimpses of hope. What is deemed sacred for one group of people might not be sacred to another group.

¹³ Reed, Introduction.

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ Spencer, *Theological Music*, 10.

So, in the context of Club Quarantine, the music played night after night maybe is not the music that would be played on a Sunday during a church service. However, it is music that invokes memories of childhood and college parties, times of joy. These extended virtual parties created a sacred, safe space to reminiscence a place to forget about the crisis that faces us outside, even for just a few hours. A non-judgmental evaluation of this moment allows us to get a glimpse of the theology of a generation.

The Club Quarantine Phenomenon and the Homiletical/Rhetorical Moment

The emergence of hip hop culture in the South Bronx in the late 1970s began with DJ Kool Herc spinning records on two turntables at block parties. “The music for rap was put together by DJs mixing stripped-down, bass-heavy, polyrhythmic beats from turntables and samplers, drawing heavily on roots in soul, funk, and disco,” eventually becoming the sound of the street.¹⁸ The DJ was initially the centerpiece of the party, spinning music and assessing the crowd to determine what music to play. As hip hop culture evolved, the MC or the rapper took center stage, becoming the focal point of the music. The DJ, at parties, at weddings, at any event, is the one who sets the tone, choosing the music, controlling the beat, shaping the narrative of the moment. We would argue that the DJ speaks through their choice of music. The music, I would contend, gives a glimpse into the rhetorical theology of the DJ.

How shall they hear without a DJ? In an interview for the *New York Times*, D-Nice admitted that he was feeling empty at the beginning of the quarantine.¹⁹ It was then that he decided to spin some music live on the social media platform *Instagram*. He began with a modest following of about 200 people. As the word spread, the follower numbers grew, and on one Saturday night, 150 thousand people were viewing simultaneously. What makes this outstanding is that D-Nice has moved the crowd, so to speak, virtually, playing the soundtrack of his followers’ lives. As comments scrolled on the screen, the people formed a community. Celebrities and non-celebrities alike talked to one another, vibing to the music. Nightly followers would comment that D-Nice’s sets gave them something to look forward to, and some even commented that this was church. For D-Nice, he discovered a way to unite people over the internet musically.²⁰

D-Nice began his music career in the late 1980s as a member of the legendary South Bronx hip hop Group Boogie Down Productions at age 15. Although he plays all Black and Pop music genres, during Club Quarantine he predominantly plays R&B music from the 70s and 80s, frequently digging up underground soulful classics from artists such as Curtis Mayfield, Marvin Gaye, Stephanie Mills, and Minnie Riperton. His musical choices have attracted all age groups, but we would venture that most listeners are from Generation X and older.

D-Nice spins records, unifying people through his music until the wee hours of the morning. This Club Quarantine movement has provided a much-needed respite amid a world of uncertainty. James H. Cone sums it all well:

Music has been and continues to be the most significant creative art expressive of African-Americans. Blacks sing and play music (in their churches and at juke-joint parties) as a way of coping with life’s

¹⁸ Robin Sylvan, “Rap Music, Hip-Hop Culture and ‘the Future Religion of the World,’” in *The Hip Hop and Religion Reader* (Routledge, 2015), 408.

¹⁹ Sandra Garcia, “The Hottest Parties in Town Are Now Online,” *New York Times*, March 21, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/21/arts/d-nice-instagram.html>.

²⁰ Jelani Cobb, “D-Nice’s Club Quarantine Is What You Need,” *The New Yorker*, March 22, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/d-nices-club-quarantine-is-what-you-need>.

contradictions and of celebrating its triumphs. We sing when we are happy, and we sing when we are sad; when we get a job and when we lose one; when we protest for our rights and when the formal achievements of them makes no difference in the quality of our life. Singing is the medium through which we talk to each other and make known our perspectives on life to the world. It is our way of recording and reflecting on our experiences the good – and the bad, the personal and the political, the sacred and the secular.

Most blacks do not acknowledge these dualisms. They believe that reality is one. The spirituals and the blues record black people's feelings – their hopes and disappointments, their dreams and nightmares. We must view them as two artistic expressions of the same black experience.²¹

D-Nice gave us nightly glimpses of heaven on earth, even for a moment, allowing our sanctified imaginations to soar while we dance in our living rooms during a pandemic. D-Nice provided the theo-rhetorical moment that has long been missing from our lives by connecting his iPhone to an auxiliary cord and playing music that brings him joy. My prayer is that this sacred space remains once the pandemic has passed on.

The COVID-19 pandemic has upended all that was, forcing many to learn how to cope in a world where an invisible virus threatens life and limb. The very sense of community has had to be re-examined and recreated, continuing to declare that “last night a DJ saved my life.” A DJ has preached a nightly message reminding us of God's love. A DJ has kept us safe and healthy simply by spinning the sacred soundtracks of our lives.

²¹ James H Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1999), <http://catalog.hathitrust.org/api/volumes/oclc/670001997.html>:Conclusion.