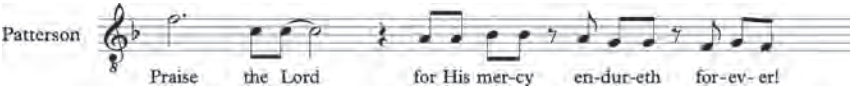
Introduction

On Sunday, November 12, 2006, the late Bishop Gilbert Earl Patterson delivered his final message to the Ninety-ninth Annual Holy Convocation of the Church of God in Christ, "Jehoshaphat's Prayer and God's Answer." Near the end of sermon whose title describes an interworldly conversation, Patterson took up the subject of sacred singing's enduring power by reanimating a treasured biblical text, 2 Chronicles 20:4–12 **[▶ Video Example INT1]**. Although this was the last message Patterson would preach to that year's meeting of his Holiness-Pentecostal denomination, his emaciated frame—the visible result of a years-long battle with metastatic prostate cancer—lent the scene an even greater sense of finality. In the face of these terminal possibilities, Bishop Patterson preached about an eternal song. As he told the story of an ancient battle's surprising outcome, Patterson reminded his congregants of the unlikely battle plan given to Jehoshaphat, the king of ancient Judah:

> You would think that if the army came in, you would hide the choir behind the army so that the army could protect the choir. But God did that thing the other way: he said, "appoint some singers, to go before the army."
>
> In other words, the army is not gon' protect the choir, but the choir is gon' protect the army.

Example 1. Eternal song in F major, FedEx Forum, Memphis, Tennessee, November 12, 2006.

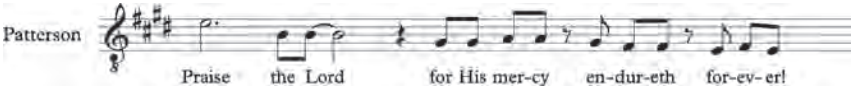


> Put the army in the back, put the choir in the front. "Well, Lord, what are they gon' sing?" God said, "All they gotta do is sing these two verses." "But, Lord, we haven't had time to rehearse." "But all you gotta do is go out there and say, 'Praise the Lord for his mercy endureth forever.'"

While this part of Patterson's sermon occurred well after he undertook the customary movement from speech toward song, the words "praise the Lord for his mercy endureth forever" heralded yet another movement: from tuning *up* to tuning *in*. Patterson's arrival at this well-known phrase—one that appears more than two dozen times in the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible—prompted him to sing a melody of his own making, a musical fragment that is depicted in Musical Example 1.

This homiletic fragment stands apart from its musical surroundings; temporarily forsaking the recitational character of his sermonic conclusion, Bishop Patterson's falling melody spans a full octave. Through its musical markedness, this brief sermonic moment offered Patterson's audience a gripping invitation into a biblical event, fomenting a transcendent journey that embodies the song's striking assertion that the Lord's mercy endures forever. But the path between Memphis's FedEx Forum and the distant scene in which these words are said to have been sung is not the only traffic that was enacted by this music. Patterson's homiletic articulation of the phrase in question is itself a testament to musical endurance. One week earlier—on Sunday, November 5, 2006—he preached a different sermon from the same text in the pulpit of his own Temple of Deliverance Church of God in Christ in Memphis, Tennessee. Near the end of that day's message, "Focusing Our Eyes upon the Lord," Bishop Patterson made his way to the same moment of unexpected singing, rendering the same melody—this time in E major, that sermon's tonal environment (Musical Example 2).

Example 2. Eternal song in E major, Temple of Deliverance Church, Memphis, Tennessee, November 5, 2006.



Throughout the last decade of Patterson's life, virtually every time he mentioned this scripture during the course of a message, this brief bit of music came into focus, suggesting that each time Bishop Patterson thought about this recorded event, this musical refrain was an essential part of what he heard. As he used this eternal song to draw his various audiences deeper into this ancient scene, he summoned a phonographic conception of scripture, implying that the act of singing could produce a palpable sonic intimacy with what had actually happened on Jehoshaphat's ancient battlefield. Yet if he is not suggesting that this melody was literally sung on Jehoshaphat's battlefield, what, exactly, is being argued? How is this argument strengthened by this melody's recurrence? And what, exactly, is accomplished through these acts of repetition?

Clearly this brief bit of music was central to Bishop Patterson's interpretation of this text. Even if it was not actually sung in the scene detailed in 2 Chronicles 20, it might have been. Thus Patterson's melody lends a contemporary immediacy to that remote occasion, performing a musical exegesis and producing a sonorous intimacy that exhorts multiple audiences to attune their ears to the interworldly reverberation of divine mercy. The persistence of this musical fragment across years of Patterson's ministry is but one thread of a much more expansive story. Patterson's rendering of this eternal song, repeatedly offered during his life, continues to echo through his musical afterlife.

While each of the aforementioned messages can still be found on YouTube, the digital circulation of "Focusing Our Eyes upon the Lord" is especially demonstrative of Bishop Patterson's posthumous resonance: three videos, of vastly differing lengths, were uploaded over a period of five years, more than a decade after Patterson's death. On June 11, 2015, nearly a decade after the sermon's proclamation, one YouTube user

uploaded a forty-three-minute video titled "GEP Focusing Our Eyes upon the Lord" onto this online repository.[1] On July 1, 2016, a YouTube account called Official Bishop G E Patterson Channel, managed by Patterson's Bountiful Blessings Ministry, uploaded a two-minute version titled "Bishop G. E. Patterson—Focusing Your Eyes upon the Lord."[2] And, on April 17, 2020, another YouTube user uploaded a sixty-four-minute video titled "GE Patterson Focusing Your Eyes upon the Lord."[3]

Taken together, these videos' inconsistent dimensions and order of appearance clarify that they represent three unique contributions to the ever-expanding virtual archive of Bishop Patterson's sermons. The earliest of these offers an invaluable window into their digital existence, for amid all that happens in this forty-three minute sermon, Patterson's eternal song stands out here too. Nestled between 31:30 and 33:10, this brief bit of music might have been easy to miss. Yet two YouTube users call attention to its emergence, commenting on this video and repeating its lyrics. While one wrote, "Praise the Lord for this mercy endures forever (three hands)," another put the lyrics in quotes, writing, "'Praise The Lord, His Mercy Endures Forever.'" Who is this viewer quoting? Patterson or the ancient choir of which he preached? This question cannot be satisfied in a single sentence. In many ways this is the question that this entire book sets out to answer, investigating the intercalation of Patterson's voice and the sonic rendering of various scriptural scenes—a process that is mediated by recurring musical devices that shape Patterson's vocality on both sides of the grave.

An Eternal Pitch: Bishop G. E. Patterson, Broadcast Religion, and the Afterlives of Ecstasy listens to the still-resounding voice of this archetypical Black preacher, showing how the intimacy audiences enjoy with Patterson's recorded messages and the proximity his sermons give to scripture's distant events both arise from his ecstatic instrumentality. More than fifteen years after Patterson's death, fragments of his characteristically musical sermons circulate across radio, television, and a host of digital platforms, including YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. Likewise, little bottles of Patterson's anointed oil and pieces of his clothing have been seeped and woven into the fabric of countless believers' devotional lives. As they upload, comment, share, extract, and wear pieces of Patterson's archive, a host of believers and social media users becomes a new kind of religious broadcaster. Like radio relays, these articulations of

digital participation strengthen and redirect Patterson's homiletic signals, extending the reach of his voice and of the divine mercy about which he preached. In this way religion is broadcast as Bishop Patterson's message travels from telephone to radio, from television to smartphones, enlisting a convergent set of new and old media to enact enduring Christian beliefs about the eternal power of the "word of God."

Not quite a biography of Patterson, not quite a history of Black Pentecostal music-making, *An Eternal Pitch* might be described as a musicological media archaeology that listens to the links between Patterson's mediated afterlife and the forms of religious mediation he practiced throughout his life. This book theorizes Patterson's Black Pentecostalism. In so doing, the project turns the very notion of religious broadcasting on its head. *An Eternal Pitch* defines and explores Patterson's Broadcast Religion, an assemblage of belief, technology, and musicality that carried Patterson to a pinnacle of religious influence while building a media infrastructure that could transmit the message long after the messenger went to sleep. Patterson's life-long preoccupation with various technologies for the reproduction and transmission of sound is inextricable from his distinctive approach to musical preaching. Patterson's technophilic Pentecostalism—one that understands machines like microphones, radios, televisions, cameras, oil, and cloth as channels through which spiritual power can flow—has its basis in the Pentecostal conviction that the human voice should become a channel of unmediated divine speech: glossolalia. As a framework for the patterning of sound, music lends Black Pentecostal instrumentality a set of sound techniques, assembling a network of sound technologies that materialize Black Pentecostal understandings of spiritual power.

As Patterson's voice reverberates within a dialectic of mediation and immediacy—calling attention to faith's technological extensions while asserting the efficacy of its interworldly transcendence—Patterson's Broadcast Religion incarnates Afterliveness.[4] Distinct from notions of "liveness" and "virtual liveness," Afterliveness names the immediacy Patterson's sermons gives to various biblical events, the appeal of his broadcasts during his period of physical animation, and the posthumous power that social media users locate in his recorded messages.[5] Transcending any single sermon's enactment, Afterliveness depends on

embodied sound reproduction, effected by Patterson through both the practice of recording and ecstatic acts of musical repetition, a set of recurring musical procedures whose reverberations endow the Bishop's ministry with an eternal pitch.

Through mediation of Patterson's homiletic voices, each message becomes an audible format, enabling numerous scenes from scripture to achieve a contemporary intensity. As these sermonic broadcasts ascend to a pitch that is as climactic as it is familiar, they clarify the inseparability of Patterson's phonographic conception of scripture from his technophilic Black Pentecostalism. Despite growing scholarly attention to encounters between Black sound and sound technologies, Black Pentecostalism remains untouched, even as its defining instrumentality makes it a prime site for such investigation. Combining resources from music studies, religious studies, Black studies, homiletics, and media studies, the project uses Patterson's resonance to intervene in discourses concerning digital culture, lived religion, sound technologies, and voice studies, all the while clarifying the contribution music analysis can make to each of these scholarly conversations.[6] My account also contributes to work on the interrelation of race and technology, a conjunction with deep ties to Black music, both in scholarship and in practice.[7]

This book's concern with the sonic and social links between Patterson's life and musical afterlife necessitates an antiphonal method that listens in two directions simultaneously: always forward and always backward. In the forthcoming chapters, I show that the ways Patterson's voice is deployed after his death clarify much about what he was up to during his life. In this way the posthumous circulation of Patterson's recorded materials—in hard copy and online—affirms literary critic John Guillory's claim that a medium's "full significance is always difficult to see in advance of remediation."[8] During Patterson's life and after his death, these devotional objects—whether recordings, oil, or cloth—have been argued to convey spiritual power across vast distances of space and time. In order to listen to Patterson's message as it acts on both sides of the grave, this book pays particular attention to those moments of performance when an unfolding sermon broke free from boundaries of space and time.

These ecstatic gestures brokered a meaningful homiletic connection between time and time past, between the congregants in twenty-first-

century Memphis and the servants of God on Jehoshaphat's battlefield, suggesting the eternal nature of sound. They also provide the sonic links between Patterson's life and afterlife. In these instants Patterson's sonic existence opens out into a form of what writer and interdisciplinary scholar Shana Redmond calls "antiphonal life," which occurs when "the repetition of a call is met by a response in and beyond the time of physical animation."[9] Over the course of Patterson's career, and with increasing intensity in the last decade of his life, as he articulated the pervasive practice of musical Black preaching, his ecstatic project became bound up with three recurring musical devices: the eternal song, the eternal riff, and the eternal pitch. As he pulls these emblems of musical endurance down from eternity into time, Patterson's unfolding sermons draw their audiences into an immersive experience that they believe to be evidence of an eternal presence.

BISHOP GILBERT E. PATTERSON

An Eternal Pitch necessitates that I outline first the crucial features of Bishop Patterson's biography, focusing on his path to ecclesial power and the primary place of religious broadcasting in this trajectory. Gilbert Earl Patterson was born in Humboldt, Tennessee, on September 22, 1939. One of five children of Bishop William Archie Patterson Sr. and Mary Louise Patterson, Gilbert Earl was born into a Church of God in Christ (COGIC) parsonage. He would not stray far from this equally real and metaphorical location. Bishop W. A. Patterson's brother, Bishop J. O. Patterson, married the daughter of COGIC founder Bishop Charles Mason, a union that facilitated substantial contact between the young Gilbert Patterson and the founder of his denomination, to whom Patterson occasionally referred as "Dad Mason."

Pastored by his father, in 1951, Gilbert was "saved" at the age of eleven; in 1956 he received the "baptism of the holy ghost" at age sixteen; and in 1957 he began preaching at age seventeen in Detroit at the New Jerusalem Church of God in Christ. On Tuesday, January 22, 1957, Patterson preached his first sermon, "We Wait for Light, but We Walk in Darkness," taken from Isaiah 59:9. A year later, in 1958, Patterson was ordained by

Bishop John S. Bailey, the same year in which his father was consecrated a Bishop in the Church of God in Christ. In the August 1959 issue of the COGIC's official organ, *The Whole Truth,* Sister Ruth Prince described Patterson's early ministry: "Elder Gilbert Patterson, the son of our pastor, illuminated our souls, lifted bowed down heads and caused the Saints to think deeper and looked up higher when he preached to us on the second Sunday. His subject was: 'Who Hath Bewitched You?'—Gal. 3:1, 1 Samuel 28 and the Lord poured out His spirit upon him. We can truly say that he is following in his father's footsteps."[10]

Elder Patterson must also have been following in the footsteps of his mother, Mary, the long-serving Sunday school superintendent for New Jerusalem COGIC and a former schoolteacher who trained at Tennessee A & I State College (now Tennessee State University). While Bishop W. A. Patterson served as pastor in Detroit, he also maintained oversight of Holy Temple Church of God in Christ in Memphis. After graduating from Detroit's Central High School and studying at the Detroit Bible Institute, the younger Patterson returned to Memphis in December 1961 to attend Lemoyne Owen College and to serve as his father's co-pastor at Holy Temple. He served there from 1961 to 1975, developing a reputation for his ability to attract large crowds—both in person and on the radio. In 1975, after a years-long church and familial dispute between his father Bishop W. A. Patterson and his uncle Bishop J. O. Patterson—Presiding Bishop of the COGIC at the time—Elder G. E. Patterson resigned from Holy Temple, disaffiliating from the COGIC to launch an independent ministry centralized in the church he would pastor until the day of his death: Temple of Deliverance, the Cathedral of Bountiful Blessings. After a thirteen-year hiatus, then Apostle Patterson officially returned to the church in 1988 as a Jurisdictional Bishop, beginning a rapid ascent to the church's highest office: Presiding Bishop.[11]

The theological emphases of COGIC form the backdrop for Patterson's Broadcast Religion; aspects of its history explain these emphases and their impact upon Patterson within his denomination and beyond it. The Church of God in Christ grew from the fertile soils of the African American Holiness movement that swept across the Arkansas Mississippi Delta in the 1890s. Reacting against what they saw as the contaminating influence of fraternal orders and other symbols of material culture, Baptist preach-