



I'M BUILDIN' ME A HOME: HEARING RITUAL AND PERFORMANCE AT HISTORICALLY BLACK COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

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This essay, by Fredara Hadley, explores the significance of ritual and performance in the cultural and academic traditions of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Using the Negro spiritual *I'm Buildin' Me a Home*—notably arranged by Uzee Brown and popularized by the Morehouse College Glee Club—as a central theme, Hadley examines how musical traditions reinforce communal identity, historical consciousness, and resilience within Black educational spaces. Through an analysis of choral performances, institutional ceremonies, and other cultural expressions, the essay highlights the ways in which music and performance serve as vital forms of collective memory and resistance against historical marginalization. Additionally, it delves into the broader implications of these traditions, illustrating how they foster a sense of belonging and continuity among students, alumni, and the wider community. Hadley situates HBCU performances within a broader framework of African American cultural expression, emphasizing their role in sustaining historical narratives and shaping contemporary experiences. Ultimately, this work underscores the enduring power of ritual and performance as foundational elements of HBCU life, reinforcing their importance in the preservation and evolution of Black cultural heritage.

ITAKE the title of this talk from Uzee Brown's arrangement of the Negro spiritual "*I'm Buildin' Me a Home*."¹ While it has been performed by countless choirs, it is most famously associated with the choral ensemble from Brown's alma mater, the Morehouse College Glee Club. The lyrics are, in part,

1. This essay is adapted from the keynote address delivered on November 8, 2023, at the second Theorizing African American Music conference, which was held at the University of Colorado at Denver.

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I'm buildin' me a home (I'm buildin)
 This earthly house is gonna soon decay,
 And my soul's gotta have
 Somewhere to stay.²

Brown's arrangement of "I'm Buildin' Me a Home" remains a standard within the Morehouse Glee Club repertoire. It is so much beloved that filmmaker and Morehouse alumnus Spike Lee used it in the evocative opening of his 1988 film about Black college life, *School Daze*. While the lyrics of this spiritual refer to building a life of spiritual and eternal rewards, it speaks to the idea of "home" — where home is, and where it can be. This question of home is central to how I theorize about the importance, contributions, and lineages of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Since their founding, HBCUs have served as a type of home for generations of black students and faculty. This question is especially resonant to me as an ethnomusicologist asking: "What type of music do Black people make when they are at home?" or, "If these institutions are a type of home, what music do they make to represent it? What type of music does one encounter at home? And why is the culminating ritual of most HBCU life not graduation but *homecoming*?"

I would like to share a bit from my ongoing research on the music of HBCUs. The purpose of this research is to understand HBCUs as essential, abundant, and complex places of Black music making. Not only that, but they are also invaluable sites of Black music intelligentsia and Black music preservation. Tammy Kernodle spoke on this latter history in her 2021 President's Plenary at the American Musicological Society in her talk entitled "Building Better Temples for Tomorrow: The Black Music Intelligentsia and the Institutionalization of Black Music Culture," in which she focused on the founding of Black Music Centers of study at HBCUs, including Fisk University, Virginia State University, and Howard University.³ My work on how HBCUs are musical is informed by understanding, to echo Kernodle's point, how they are also scholarly. Thus, HBCUs are significant sites of music innovation and music knowledge production. In researching HBCU ensembles, faculty, radio, and other musical media, we must center HBCU archives, faculty, newspapers, and other sources.

If the Black Church and Black social spaces like juke joints have been critical incubators of Black music, HBCUs are the third leg of the stool. HBCUs have important connections with Negro spirituals, choral ensembles, and marching bands. But they also bear connections with gospel, funk, R&B, and hip-hop. Yet,

2. Uzee Brown, arr., "I'm Buildin' Me a Home" (Lawson-Gould, 1987).

3. Tammy Kernodle, "Building Better Temples for Tomorrow: The Black Music Intelligentsia and the Institutionalization of Black Music Culture," President's Plenary Lecture, Annual Meeting of the American Musicological Society, November 12, 2021, virtual conference.

as I began my research, I was surprised to realize how little was written on the musicality these institutions foster. Yes, there is important research about important ensembles such as the Fisk Jubilee Singers or the Morgan State University Marching Band. But my research revealed there is also a need for an overall theory as to how to discuss the types of music, who is making the music, and which musics that happen within the HBCU sphere are appropriate.

HBCUs represent a constellation of over one hundred and twenty past and present schools founded mostly during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The first HBCU founded was Cheyney State University in Pennsylvania in 1837 (then the African Institute). HBCU locations span the East Coast from Dover, Delaware, to Miami, Florida, and as far west as Langston, Oklahoma. Some HBCUs were established by Black founders and religious organizations, others by state and federal governments, and some by White religious organizations and philanthropists. HBCU alumni include notable names such as Martin Luther King Jr. (Morehouse College), Kamala Harris (Howard University), and significant contributions to the ranks of Black teachers, pharmacists, engineers, nurses, and other professions in the United States.

Thinking about the musics of HBCUs matters because it reflects an everydayness that is the bedrock of African-descended music and people. In his seminal book, *The Power of Black Music*, renowned musicologist Samuel A. Floyd Jr., an HBCU alumnus and former faculty member, wrote that “scholars seem to agree that the aim of African music has always been to translate the experiences of life and the spiritual world into sound, enhancing and celebrating life through cradle songs, songs of reflection, historical songs, fertility songs, songs about death and mourning, and other varieties.”⁴ This became the lens through which I began cataloging the types of music I noticed on HBCU campuses. This is not to say that they all exist on every campus similarly. Thus, I humbly adapt Floyd’s quote to imagine the functions of musics on Black college campuses by saying HBCU musics aim to translate the manifold experiences of Black life into sound, enhancing and celebrating Black life through spirituals, art songs, songs of initiation, battle songs, historical songs, songs that connect generations, songs that facilitate social life, and other varieties. What I am interested in is looking at the layers, rituals, and pedagogies that exist at these institutions. While there are similar rituals at many HBCUs, each school has its own unique interpretation of them.

Returning to Floyd’s assertion, one of the most important things our research can do is to remain connected to everyday Black life. Keeping this obvious point central is especially important in a political climate where the teaching of African American history and the violent targeting of Black people remains a reality.

4. Samuel A. Floyd Jr., *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States* (Oxford University Press, 1996), 32.

In holding that truth central, I came to understand that how these musics fit together on HBCU campuses tells us about shifting musical values, pedagogies, lineages, and rituals.

The histories of famed choral ensembles, such as the Fisk Jubilee Singers and Hampton University Choir, are a point of origin for chronicling music at HBCUs. Yet, early HBCU music history must also include W. C. Handy's turn as band director in 1900 at Alabama A&M University (then the State Agricultural and Mechanical College for Negroes). However, there is also the ritual repertoire of HBCU music, including the hymns, chants, and strolls that Black Greek organizations hold sacred in their private and public rituals. There are the alma maters, fight songs, and spirit songs. Students imbue their campus with their own musics. Parties, campus radio, and, increasingly, social media content about their schools are soundtracks of their experiences at HBCUs. But how does one make sense of so much music happening on a campus in so many different ways? I propose a four-part model of looking at points of emphasis: curricular, campus, community, and crossover.

The first point within the model is *curricular* musics. The most important qualification here is that these rituals and performances are led by music department faculty (as opposed to those organized and led by students). Even though these are Black-serving institutions, Black music genres outside of classical and Negro spirituals faced resistance to being taught in the curriculum. Using university catalogs and records to track the ensembles that emerge and disappear creates a longitudinal study in institutional musical values. Curricular musics also include pedagogical approaches to coaching ensembles and teaching music theory, music history, and ethnomusicology.

The second point is *campus*. These are performances or rituals that may be performed by a university ensemble, a student club ensemble, or a student group with the campus, faculty, students, alumni, or some subset of these groups as its primary audience. This includes convocations, graduations, yard days and set days, homecoming, the presentation of new members of fraternities and sororities, and campus parties. For example, as an HBCU alumna, I am most familiar with the campus rituals of my alma mater. Whenever I visit another HBCU for homecoming, I understand the general flow of how HBCU homecomings go but not the chants and songs that a host school sings. I argue that these distinctions are material because they represent the evolution of music and ritual at *that* HBCU. The most effective HBCU music theorizing holds shared traditions in view while acknowledging the differences and what those differences reveal.

The third point is *community*. These are performances intended to reach a broader Black audience that is familiar with the ritual and music being played in some way, shape, or form. This might be a football game, a battle of the bands, church event, or parade. While there is overlap between campus and community,

the intent here is the emphasis on an audience that is external to the university. The ensemble might be actively recruiting for the university or it is cultivating connection among Black audiences through shared music traditions.

The final element is *crossover*. HBCU music ensembles have had a considerable influence on American and global popular culture. My notion accounts for the meaning that HCBU musics have among members of their communities while acknowledging the impact the different types of music have beyond each campus and its alumni. Over decades, the Spelman Glee Club has performed in Europe and South America. The Macy's Day Parade routinely features HBCU marching bands, including Alabama A&M University's Marching Maroon & White, Benedict College's Marching Tiger Band of Distinction, Hampton University's Marching Force, Howard University's Showtime Marching Band, Morgan State's Magnificent Marching Machine, Morris Brown's Marching Wolverines, and Prairie View A&M's Marching Storm. The commercially successful 2007 film *Stomp the Yard* focused on the stepping rituals and competitions of Black Greek letter organizations.

This model is an attempt to read performance, the repertoire included in performance, and audience response to understand its construction and function of the music in the moment. An HBCU musical moment or ritual can serve multiple purposes at once, but in my research, I work to identify what the leading one is. Although I use the word *ritual*, I return to Floyd's notion of the everydayness of it all. Some rituals are annual, but HBCU campuses are rife with rituals and performances that connote not only regularity but everydayness. So, then, it is not only campuswide rituals that count but also the places where students gather on campus to hang out and the music that soundtracks their gatherings.

I will now discuss specific musical examples to explore this model. I am going to take a point of personal privilege and use my own alma mater's marching band, the Incomparable FAMU Marching 100, otherwise known as "America's Band." The first Florida A&M band is said to have been organized by Nathaniel Campbell Adderley, patriarch of the Adderley family, which included jazz legends Julian "Cannonball" Adderley and Nat Adderley Sr. (both of whom were also in the FAMU marching band). But the ensemble that would become the famed Marching 100 was founded by William P. Foster in 1946. Foster would go on to lead the band for fifty-two years, taking the band to Super Bowl performances, presidential inaugurations, and the 200th Bastille Day celebration in Paris.

I am going to give four examples from four Marching 100 performances that highlight the four emphases of HBCU musical ritual discussed earlier. Just a note that there's a way to read each example in multiple categories, but I'm focusing on the aspect that I see as the leading category. What is more, three of the four connect with black religious musics.

Let's start with curricular music. The Florida A&M Department of Music has several music ensembles. Among them are the Concert Choir, Jazz Ensemble, Latin Jazz Ensemble, the Marching 100, Symphonic Band, and the Symphonic Band Wind Ensemble. On February 16, 2023, the Florida A&M Symphonic Band Wind Ensemble performed at the College Band Director National Association's Annual Meeting hosted at the University of Georgia. Here, you have the Florida A&M Symphonic Band Wind Ensemble presenting a diverse program at a music educators' conference to promote the caliber of their music program at FAMU. They performed a concert of mostly contemporary composers John Mackey, Kevin Day, Michele Fernandez, and Viet Cuong. They concluded their program with *Come Sunday* by Omar Thomas (see Figure 1). In his program note, Thomas writes:

Come Sunday is a two-movement tribute to the Hammond organ's central role in black worship services. The first movement, Testimony, follows the Hammond organ as it readies the congregation's hearts, minds, and spirits to receive The Word via a magical union of Bach, blues, jazz, and R&B. The second movement, Shout!, is a virtuosic celebration—the frenzied and joyous climactic moment(s) when The Spirit has taken over the service. The title is a direct nod to Duke Ellington, who held an inspired love for classical music and allowed it to influence his own work in a multitude of ways. To all the black musicians in wind ensemble who were given opportunity after opportunity to celebrate everyone else's music but our own—I see you and I am you. This one's for the culture!⁵

Since the *Come Sunday* premiere in 2018, it has been performed by dozens of university wind ensembles, yet in this performance, the Florida A&M Symphonic Band Wind Ensemble borrows elements from its marching band tradition that further emphasize the cultural themes and intent of Thomas's piece. In *Shout!* Shelby Chipman, the conductor, has instrumental sections stand and play as they take turns offering the “call” in the antiphonal structure of the music. Further, the sense of “aliveness” in the music is undoubtedly a result of the ensemble's familiarity with gospel music, which has also become a staple of the Marching 100 repertoire.⁶ This performance, which comprised music majors and non-majors, serves as an example of HBCU curricular music in that it represents the music of the ensembles within the academic music department at Florida A&M University.

5. *Come Sunday*, Wind Repertory Project, accessed September 24, 2025, https://www.windrep.org/Come_Sunday.

6. Here, aliveness refers to Portia Maultsby's discussion of Africanisms in Black American music and how the notion of aliveness is connected to spiritedness and vitality within a performance. See Portia K. Maultsby, “Africanisms in African-American Music,” in *Africanisms in American Culture*, edited by Joseph E. Holloway (Indiana University Press, 1990), 185–210.



Figure 1: Florida A&M Symphonic Band Wind Ensemble performs *Come Sunday* by Omar Thomas.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KYvf7tCw6ig>.

The second example is of a campus ritual in which the Florida A&M Marching 100 performed in a symphonic arrangement at Homecoming Convocation 2021 (see Figure 2). In this case, Homecoming Convocation is only one of the many rituals embedded within the ritual event of Homecoming Week. Here, the Marching 100 concludes the convocation prelude with “FAMU Spirit.” It is one of the many FAMU spirit songs that are sung at sporting events but also university assemblies. In listening, it is striking that this song is not a composition but an arrangement and lyrical adaptation of the Negro Spiritual “Give Me That Old Time Religion.” So here you have a song born within the nineteenth-century Black Church that becomes a meaningful anthem and an integral part of emboldening school spirit. This campus ritual is effective precisely because it is a continuation of a long-standing religious rite, albeit in a different context, but one with which many Florida A&M community members would be familiar and because it has been reimagined to where fans now sing, “Give me that ole FAMU Spirit, it’s good enough for me.”

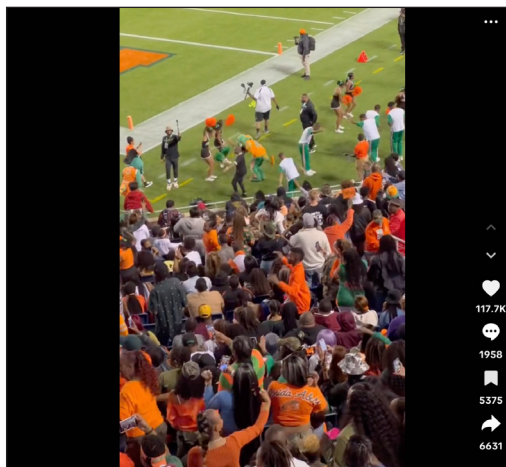


Figure 2: Florida A&M Marching 100 performs “Give Me That Ole FAMU Spirit.”
<https://www.tiktok.com/@jhoriahnaemusic/video/7033785729956449582>.

The third example represents community music. At the 2021 Florida Classic football game in Orlando, Florida, the Marching 100 begins playing the gospel classic “He’s an On Time God” by Dottie Peoples (see Figure 3). The song was released in 1994 and is a staple on gospel radio and in many Black churches. The Marching 100 repertoire includes other gospel songs that they play as a pep band in the stands and shows such as “Order My Steps” that they perform on the field. “Order My Steps” was made popular by Gospel Music Workshop of America Women of Worship and “Total Praise” by Richard Smallwood. The setting is a football stadium at a football game and includes gospel and taps into Black Church rituals that, in the twenty-first century, exist within the community and beyond campus borders. Playing “He’s an On Time God” has the desired effect, as game attendees begin singing playfully and “performing” the rituals of Black Church experience, including dancing and conducting a choir. TikTok user @jhoriahnae-music recorded the performance for TikTok and added the caption, “One thing FAMU gonna do...is WORSHIP.”⁷ In her commentary and her skilful melodic improvisation, she thus unites the performance of the Marching 100 with another musical ritual within the Black community, that of worship. It is important to note that while the band is playing an instrumental arrangement of the song, the attendees enthusiastically and boisterously sing the words. This is all evidence of how deeply embedded the song is within the community in which Florida A&M sits.



Figure 3: Florida A&M Marching 100 performs “He’s an On Time God” by Dottie Peoples.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rhzFKoterNI>.

The final example is that of crossover. In May of 2023, Louis Vuitton invited the FAMU Marching 100 to perform at their 2022 men’s fashion show in Paris (see Figure 4). The show was produced as a tribute to its late creative direc-

7. As of December 2024, @jhoriahnae-music’s TikTok recording has over five hundred thousand views. Its virality is further evidence of its resonance. JhoriahnaeMusic, “RATTLAH-HHS STAND UP!,” *TikTok* video, 0:27, posted November 19, 2021, <https://www.tiktok.com/@jhoriahnae-music/video/7033785729956449582>.

tor Virgil Abloh, who died in 2021. Abloh dedicated his fashion designing to acknowledging Black youth and Black excellence. In planning the show the producers believed that an HBCU band epitomized all that Abloh stood for.



Figure 4: Florida A&M Marching 100 performs in the 2023 Louis Vuitton men's fashion show. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6SX5oBOMArI>.

About the performance, the director of bands Shelby Chipman said, "The Louis Vuitton fashion show provided a different kind of venue to showcase the band's repertoire" and, "We brought Tallahassee; we brought Florida A&M; we brought the Incomparable Marching '100' to Paris by performing all the highlights we perform at Bragg Memorial Stadium and traveling on the road. That made it special."⁸ In discussing the Marching 100's Paris performance, he spoke about place, specifically the Marching 100's home, Bragg Stadium. Chipman's response explained how the triumph of their Louis Vuitton performance was that it was well received by the audience and that it represented the spirit of the band's campus rituals. The Marching 100 performance was therefore successful with a global fashion audience by remaining committed to the performance and rituals that the band honed on FAMU's campus.

And, in fact, what you see is the band performing one of its enduring FAMU spirit songs, "Mighty Rattler." Here, the call and response that would normally happen between the band and the audience happens within the band itself. Yet as one familiar with the ritual of "Mighty Rattler," when I watched the fashion show I recognized the spirit of the campus ritual, even though it was happening on a catwalk instead of our football field in Tallahassee.

Finally, I want to return to what Chipman said about performing in Paris. He said we brought Tallahassee, Florida A&M, and the highlights that we perform

8. Andrew Skerritt, "FAMU Marching '100' Band Makes Triumphant Paris Return at Louis Vuitton Fashion Show," Florida A&M University, June 24, 2022, <https://www.larattlers.com/post/women-overtake-men-in-college-degrees>.

at Bragg Stadium to Paris.⁹ Tallahassee, Florida A&M, and Bragg Stadium are three different ways that he's calling "home." The music they play and how they play it were designed and practiced at home and have become ritual with their home crowd. I interviewed my cousin, former FAMU head drum major Victor Gaines, and he confirmed Chipman's point by saying, "You can hear the Marching 100 anywhere in the world, but there's nothing like hearing them at *home* at Bragg Stadium."¹⁰

In *Blues People*, Amiri Baraka (then LeRoi Jones) discussed how tracing Black music history exhibited how Black people, often under hostile circumstances, imagined, made, and challenged Black identities.¹¹ Jones asserts that making music is how Black people have been able to "keep keepin' on" and to make themselves a home under trying circumstances. HBCUs do not play a significant role in his discussion. Yet, the question should be asked: What role do HBCUs play in this Black musical history? This paper is an initial step to theorize about the complexities of how music has flowed from these campuses. Yet I am convinced by my research and lived experience that HBCUs are a significant contributor to how people imagine, make, and challenge Black identities by making and theorizing about Black music.

I conclude with a comment that writer Toni Morrison once said in an interview where she spoke about the study of African American culture, which I believe also applies to HBCU culture. She said, "If you study the culture and art of African Americans, you are not studying a regional or minor culture. What you are studying is America. That the access, the root, via the culture of the people of this country is interdisciplinary, it's provocative, it's reflective and it's about you and me."¹² Studying the impact of how HBCUs do music and are musical is not solely a study in Southernness, or Blackness, or the elite. The music of this consortium of over one hundred schools is a way of studying the musical development of the United States. But perhaps even more importantly, this history illuminates how young Black people and dedicated faculty and staff, in fits and starts, build home.

9. Skeritt, "FAMU Marching '100' Band."

10. Victor Gaines, interview by the author, August 8, 2021. The italics on "home" represent the interviewee's emphasis.

11. Leroi Jones, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (Harper Perennial, 1999).

12. Toni Morrison, interview by Charlie Rose, *Charlie Rose*, Public Broadcasting Service, May 7, 1993.