

An analyses of when the saints go marching in

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Kevin Fickel MUSC 105. 003 An Analysis of “ When the Saints Go Marching In” The origins of “ When the Saints” have never been fully explained in modern times. It was originally written as a Negro Spiritual hymn sometime near the beginning of the twentieth century. On writtenmusic, composers usually notate it as a traditional piece, but the identity of the original author remains up for debate.

Some sources claim that the original lyrics of “ When the Saints” were penned by Katherine Pervis and put to music by James Black in 1896, but many scholars today believe that Pervis and Black’s composition was a completely different piece of music due to it being titled “ When the Saints Are Marching In”. Regardless, the original lyrics contain many spiritual references, particularly to heaven and the coming of God’s kingdom.

In one of the verses, the author writes “ Oh when the trumpet sounds its call, oh when the trumpet sounds its call, I want to be in that number, when the trumpet sounds its call,” which is a reference to a passage in the book of Revelations, located in the New Testament of the Christian Bible. The passage describes the sounding of seven trumpets by angels of heaven. Each trumpet brings about a specific catastrophic event upon the world below, which is filled with those who were not taken in to heaven at the onset of the world’s end.

Other references to things such as “...the moon turns red with blood... ” and “...when the new world is revealed...” are tied in with the end of days described in Revelations, which the author describes a desire to avoid by being in heaven. Though the original lyrics describe dark and unfortunate events, today “ When the Saints” has a positive connotation attached to it.

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When it is performed in modern times, it is at a much faster tempo and the melody swings at an infectiously catchy pace.

This change started probably due to a trend that originated in New Orleans that consisted of inserting a verse that discussed how a former friend or relative had died, moved away, or was estranged from them and how they desired to see them again, often in the next life (i. e. heaven). In one of the earliest know recordings of “ When the Saints”, the blues artist Barbeque Bob sings “...I had a dear old mother, she’s gone on to heaven I know, I promised the Lord I’d meet her, when the Saints go marching in.... The belief that a one will be able to reunite with all of their loved ones who have passed away before them, coupled with an image of heaven as eternal paradise for a soul instills hope in an individual. Taking this into account may explain the prevalence of bands performing “ When the Saints” in New Orleans funeral marches. It may be that in thecultureof New Orleans a funeral is not only a place for mourning the dead, but also a time to celebrate the deceased’s passing into eternal paradise.

Thus, “ When the Saints” began a transformation from a solemn hymn to an upbeat funeral piece and then to one of the most famous jazz songs of all time. This transformation is quite staggering. When the song was first written, there was no recordingtechnologythat enabled its original form to be preserved. Barbeque Bob performed the earliest recording of “ When the Saints” in the early twentieth century. His rendition is performed on acoustic guitar and has a very resigned tempo with the overall tone of the piece being one that fosters reflection.

This style was probably representative of the standard way to play the piece at the time and most likely remained so until Louis Armstrong recorded his rendition of “ When the Saints” in the format that most people recognize. Armstrong played “ When the Saints” at a much faster tempo than Barbeque Bob and with a more upbeat and fun tone and with a full band featuring trombones, drums, a string bass, trumpet, clarinet, and several other instruments. Armstrong’s rendition ushered in the more common rendition of “ When the Saints” that emulates his fast tempo and upbeat tone.

Armstrong also created a way of playing “ When the Saints” that allowed for passages of improvisation, a mainstay in jazz music. The strophic form of the verses and running bass allows for other instruments to take turns improvising before returning to the original melody. However, this also caused “ When the Saints” to become a more secular piece as it lost its previously sacred themes and lyrics. In a duet between Louis Armstrong and Danny Kaye, the lyrics previously talking about the end of days and joining with others in heaven are replaced with a series of clever puns of the names of famous classical composers.

This shows the shift of “ When the Saints” from a sacred hymn intended to inspire to a song intended to entertain. Instead of being played in church sanctuaries, it mostly is performed at concerts by ensembles not affiliated with any particular church. In listening to different recordings of this timeless piece that I myself have performed a few times in my life, I was most surprised to learn that “ When the Saints” was not always an upbeat jazz piece. Hearing the evolution of this song through the various recordings was

very interesting. I can say that I have a newfound interest in this piece that was not there before.