

Sonic Spirituality: Meditations on Eminem's "Beautiful" and "My Darling"

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Abstract

*Guest writer Marcia Alesan Dawkins's new book on rapper **Eminem**, Eminem: The Real Slim Shady is now available. We here at Sounding Out! are thrilled, so for this week's post we asked Dr. Dawkins to give us a glimpse into a side of the notorious rapper that few may have heard: the intersection between artist and spirituality.*

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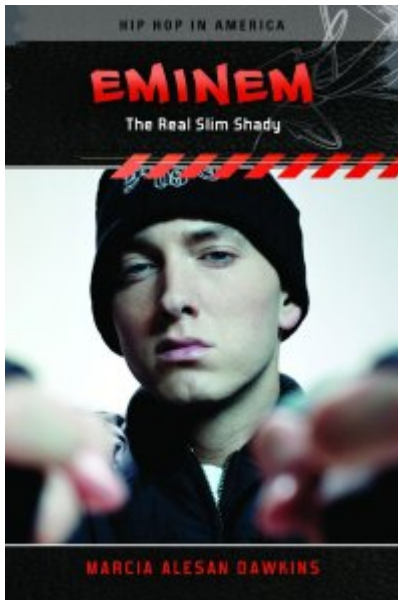
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Guest writer Marcia Alesan Dawkins's new book on rapper **Eminem**, [Eminem: The Real Slim Shady](#) is now available. We here at Sounding Out! are thrilled, so for this week's post we asked Dr. Dawkins to give us a glimpse into a side of the notorious rapper that few may have heard: the intersection between artist and spirituality. This comes just in time too, considering **Kanye West's** latest release, [Yeezus](#), not to mention [Touré's](#) recent biography of **Prince**, [I Would Die 4 U: Why Prince Became an Icon](#) (2013), which examines the confluence of celebrity and spirituality for a generation of Prince fans. Without further ado, give it up for [Dr. Dawkins](#)! **Pump it up pump it up pump it up!** —**Liana M Silva-Ford, Managing Editor**

[Eminem](#) caught my ear a year before [The Slim Shady LP](#) hit record stores in 1999, when I came across a single released by Rawkus Records called "[5 Star Generals](#)" (1998) on which he made a guest appearance. I would later learn that this was an old track the rapper recorded for cash while he was unsigned and then forgot. Nevertheless, Em's first lines about sinning boldly, shooting nuns in Bible class, and damning hell itself hit me like a ton of bricks. I knew that lines like his, which were sure to enrage anyone within earshot, would make him (in)famous.

To my surprise, I learned a year later that my 89-year-old Cuban American grandfather, a poet and a reverend, had been listening to Eminem too. This struck me as strange for two reasons. First, my grandfather wasn't fluent in English. Second, he'd never expressed much interest in rap music other than commenting that he noticed kids rapping in the parks near his house in Hollis, Queens every now and then. Of course, I knew that many of those boom-box-toting kids were now superstars like [Run-DMC](#) and [LL Cool J](#), but my Grandfather didn't.

When I entered the living room to the sound of Slim Shady, my grandfather sat transfixed. After the song ended, I asked him if he knew what he was hearing. Sitting up in his blue La-Z-Boy recliner he said, "I'm listening to some guy who calls himself Eminem. I can tell he's probably a heathen and I don't care. I love what he's doing with his words." I was shocked. My grandfather went on to tell me that despite the obvious language and experiential barriers that stood between him and Eminem, he was in awe of the way the rapper was using his voice and his words as instruments. What really got me was when my grandfather said that Eminem's unapologetic tone reminded him of many preachers' fiery delivery over the years. I could not believe it. Grandpa's encounter with Eminem was not just sonic. It was spiritual.



Fifteen years later I am still listening for what my grandfather heard. In the process, my ears have been captivated by Eminem's sonic spirituality, open to its every sound. So open, in fact, that I dedicated three chapters [in my forthcoming book](#) to understanding how his music can be seen as a dynamic sphere of spiritual activity in terms of guilt-purification-redemption, love-hate, and relationship-awareness. While paying attention to Eminem's sonic spirituality began as a personal exercise, it now represents an important part of understanding how spirituality operates culturally and is just like sound: recognizable, uncontainable and elusive.

In other words, I've finally understood what my grandfather was trying to tell me — *how*, rather than simply *what*, he heard in Eminem's music. Here's the revelation: sonic spirituality is a listening attitude, a personalized relationship with music that allows us to mark time, experience the intangible, track movement, engage otherness and, in the end, encounter more honest versions of ourselves. Sonic spirituality, then, might be characterized as open instead of closed, exploratory and experimental rather than static. Eminem's spiritual themes play out in terms of solidarity with the supernatural, a mistrust of organized religion due to its inherent hypocrisy, a desire for redemption from guilt through purification, and an intense personal battle between love and hate. Following are two potent examples of what I've found in Eminem's oeuvre from 2009's [Relapse: Refill](#), examples that showcase the development of his sonic spirituality over the decade since my grandfather first introduced it to me.



<https://youtu.be/lgT1AidzRWM>

In "Beautiful" (2009), Eminem poses a powerful question: What would you think if you saw someone important, like a government official or celebrity, digging around in the trash? The answer: you'd probably think that this kind of behavior was suitable for beggars only and certainly not for yourself or someone very important. But this is exactly what the rapper does in "Beautiful." He looks for himself, others, and their fallen world or Eden (aka Detroit, Michigan) and finds everyone and everything in the garbage. In this way, "Beautiful" is a lovely parable. As with any parable, its objective is to illustrate a moral or a spiritual lesson using a simple human relation. The lesson in this case is looking for something or someone that has been lost. In Eminem's parable, there are seven ideas expressed about how to find what we have lost and develop our spiritual selves along the way: loss (the starting point of humanity's spiritual condition), light (a force created through words), movement (standing in another person's shoes), discovery (finding what's lost in low places), salvation (anyone can be redeemed), connection (exchange traditional religion for a new culture of communication with the supernatural), and celebration (that everyone can be made beautiful again).

These seven images are evoked by the lyrics and music. The slow and deliberate beat invites listeners to connect the subject and object; the song and themselves, the song and the rapper. The release provided as Eminem sings the chorus doesn't just change the course of the song, but converts the shared loss into an opportunity for discovery, salvation, connection and celebration. Just as the discovery begins, the drums suddenly increase in volume; the bass and guitar begin to cry out as a background harmony in a major key builds and adds to the intensity. The sounds remind us even if we choose to shield our eyes, we cannot shield our ears from the plight of our fellows and that this is a call to action, salvation and celebration. In "Beautiful" Eminem listeners become aware of others' oppression while remembering that they are no stronger or more beautiful than anyone else. In this way listeners are engaged not just with the sounds, but also with the spirits of the people who produce them in active relationship.

https://youtu.be/NRF_H7dewWY

The experiences and encounters inherent in Eminem's alternative spiritual portrait, "My Darling" (2009), still emphasize the same spiritual themes I pointed out earlier: personal struggles between light and darkness, finding a purpose in suffering, and seeing a connection between societal and supernatural powers. Only this time, the supernatural power belongs to the Devil. Yet, unlike other songs in which Eminem does battle with the Devil or suffers for his sins through eternal damnation, "My Darling" is about a soul living in hell on earth. In this way, "My Darling" is both a lamentation and a dark parable whose moral complements that of "Beautiful." Eminem shares this moral in "My Darling" through six ideas about what happens when a person is losing his or her battle with the demons he or she carries inside. These ideas are uncertainty (never being sure about redemption), possession (selling one's soul), darkness (force maintained by the absence of words), harm (effects of love turning to hate), wholeness (spiritual relationships based on labor and exchange rather than on salvation and forgiveness), and lament (mourning one's losses of self and loved ones).

As in "Beautiful," the lyrics and the music evoke spiritual elements. The song is set to a minor key, which communicates penitential lamentation, intimate conversation with the Devil, and echoes with sighs of disappointment, divorce and disillusion. Possession, darkness and harm are communicated through call and response between Eminem and the Devil, who hears and accepts Eminem's invitation and appears in his mirror where he whispers seductively for Eminem to draw close. The increasing intensity and harm of the spiritual exchange between Mathers and the Devil is reflected in their verbal back-and-forth. Their "souls, minds and bodies" are increasingly connected as they exchange more and more words. And the words become more desperate and cruel. At the end of the song, Eminem submits. Listeners come to understand that Eminem and the Devil are one and whole as the Devil's final solo becomes the pair's solemn duet. The two have become one spirit through a relationship of exchange and possession.



"Eminem, Lil Wayne Named 'Gods Of Rock' By GQ" by Flickr usermp3waxx.com, CC-BY-NC-SA-2.0

The recurrence of spiritual themes in Eminem's soundscape suggests that music is a way to communicate with the other who is both present and hidden. Sometimes the other is God. Sometimes the other is the Devil. Sometimes the other is other people. Sometimes the other is the other within. The tones, rhythmic patterns, key changes, intensity and release patterns combine with Eminem's lyrics to create an experience within which listeners can be still, in which their souls can take refuge, and the other can be encountered. However, though sonic spirituality exists in Eminem's music, and [rumors abound](#) regarding his "born again" status, it cannot be argued that Eminem adheres to a particular religion. Rather, the sonic spiritual element suggests that Eminem communicates a genuine awareness of supernatural powers, [guilt-redemption-purification](#) and [love-hate](#) that allows him to relate to the world at large. In this way Eminem is one of many artists whose pop culture content carries a strong spiritual dimension that is sonic, confirming results of Chris Rojek's study, entitled "[Celebrity and Religion](#)," which argues that "celebrity culture is secular society's rejoinder to the decline of religion and magic" (393).



"DJ Hero party – Eminem 2" by Flickr user monsieurlam, CC-BY-NC-SA-2.0

As "Beautiful" and "My Darling" demonstrate, the spiritual reflections heard in Eminem's music are not just harmonic, they are also discordant, revealing how conflicted we often are about ourselves and the supernatural. Just as Eminem walks with God in "Beautiful" and dances with the Devil in "My Darling," audiences listening to his music are able to escape from their own worlds and find temporary refuge in sonic spirituality. This idea didn't start with Eminem, or with the Judeo-Christian tradition, as many faiths across time and space utilize the power of music to evoke higher powers and acquire spiritual insight through prayers, storytelling, meditation, chanting, mantras, singing, silent vows, etc. But Eminem has added his own unique touch by using his personas Slim Shady and Marshall Mathers to speak with demonic and godly authority, respectively. As Peter Ward writes in [Gods Behaving Badly](#), the spiritual power of Eminem's music

for audiences lies in its representations of a "conflicted and complex self clothed in the metaphors of the divine and reflected back to us" (107). In other words, sonic spirituality is about engaging with something beyond the world around us while grappling with the personas and situations into which we're immersed. As the music plays we are challenged to develop a listening heart.

The popularity of Eminem's music supports the conclusion that his brand of sonic spirituality is set to the same rhythm as the hearts of fans that buy and listen to his messages. But his work can also speak to those who consider themselves spiritually committed, even if that commitment is often not manifested in traditional religious activities. In this way the dynamic nature of sonic spirituality manifests as a way of listening that allows for communication and communion through music and language. If the above is true, then we can take Eminem's claim, [expressed via tweet](#), that "music has the power to heal" as a spiritual declaration. And we can also take [a fan's response to this tweet](#) as an Amen: "All Eminem songs has [sic] a spiritual connection... you have to have the ear to find that for yourself."

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Featured Image: "Slim Shady" by Flickr user Walt Jabasco, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

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Marcia writes about racial passing, mixed race identities, media, popular culture, religion and politics for a variety of high-profile publications. She earned her PhD in communication from USC Annenberg, her master's degrees in humanities from USC and NYU and her bachelor's degrees in communication arts and honors from Villanova. Contact: www.marciadawkins.com

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