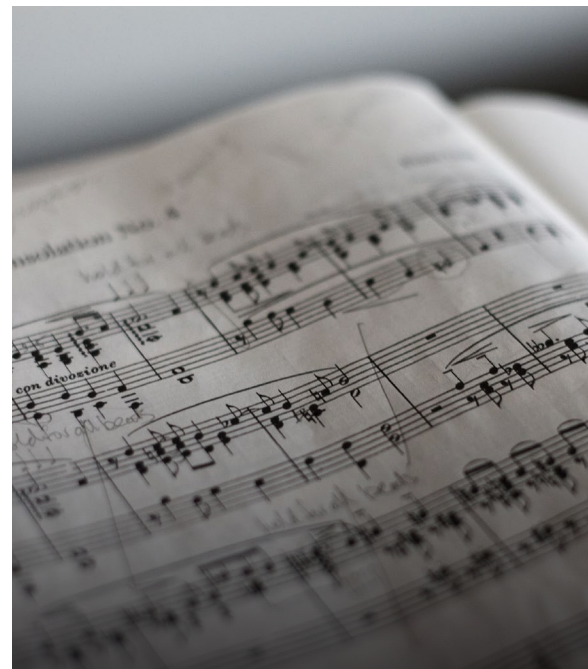




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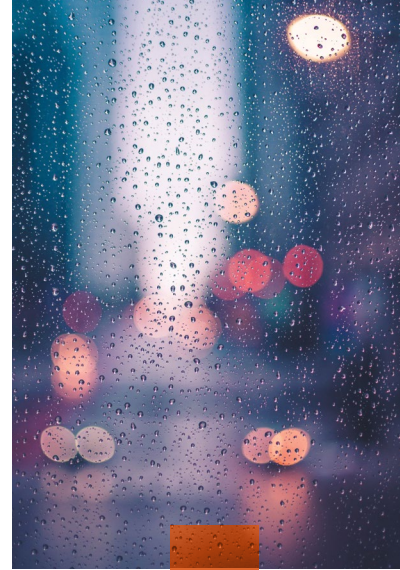
The Artist Alive: Explorations in Music, Art & Theology

by Christopher Pramuk

Introduction

From my childhood to the present day, my own spirituality or way of being in the world has been profoundly shaped by music, not least its capacity to carry me beyond myself and into communion with the mysterious, transcendent dimension of reality. From high school to undergraduate and graduate school classrooms, I've also marveled at the impact of engaging the arts with students as a doorway into life's most enduring human, spiritual, and theological questions.

Can the so-called "secular" music of artists like Pink Floyd, Joni Mitchell, Lady Gaga, and Bruce Springsteen bear us into realms of the holy and sacred? Can the social and racial critique embedded in Stevie Wonder's music disturb our personal and collective consciences, perhaps even opening the eyes of the "blind" to see? To what extent do songwriters, painters, filmmakers, and other artists play a prophetic role in society and church? Can art be a vehicle of hope, stirring that wondrous if elusive capacity in human beings to imagine a more just, humane, and joyful future? Such questions are implicitly theological insofar as they engage us in the search for answers to the deepest yearnings of human experience, and are attentive to moments in which that search confronts us with mysteries beyond understanding, not least, the ineffable reality believers name "God." . . .

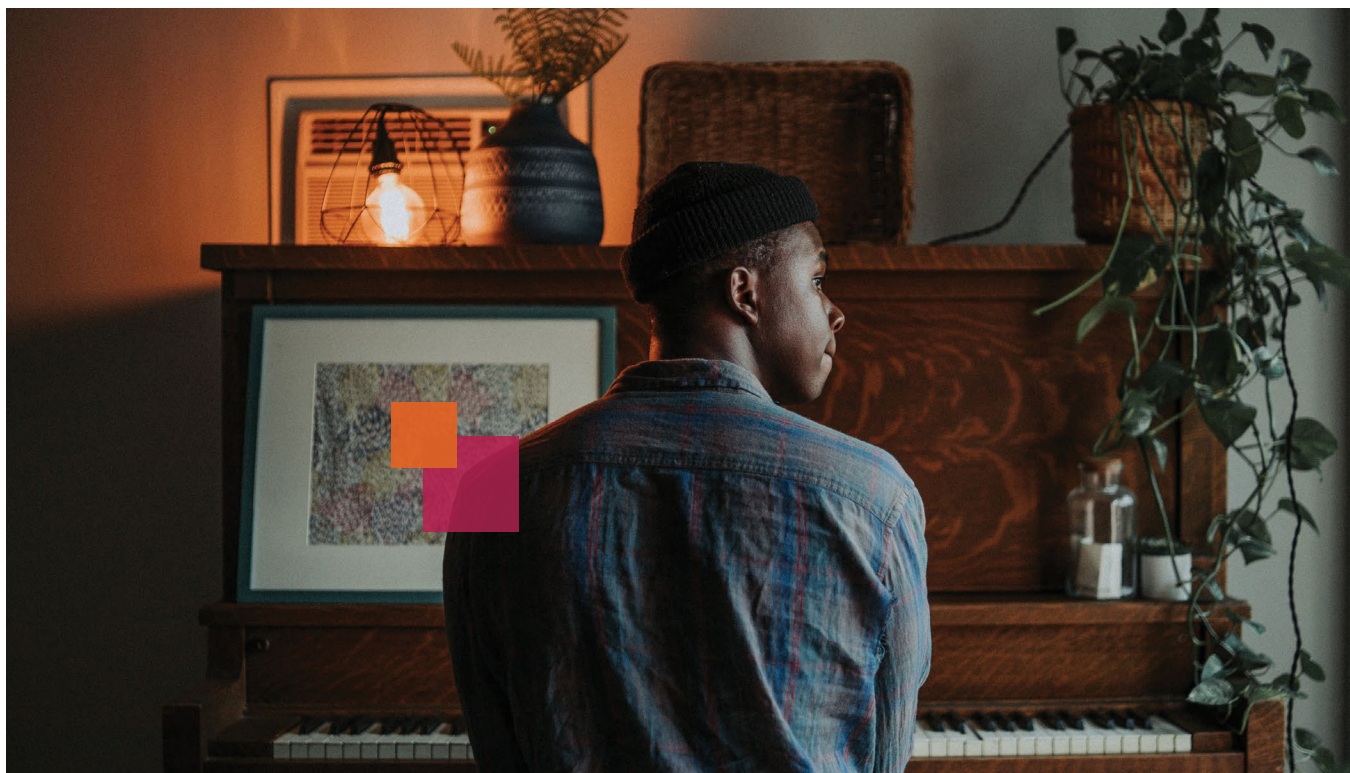


"Joy inside My Tears"

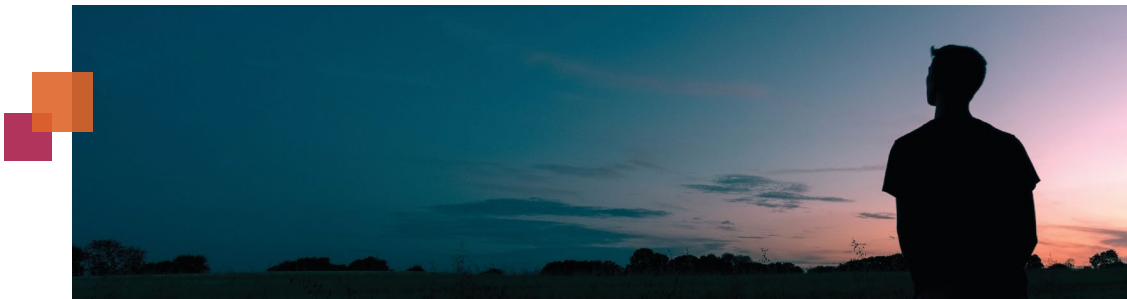
In 1976 Motown recording artist Stevie Wonder released a double-album masterpiece called *Songs in the Key of Life*, giving voice to the joys and struggles of life in inner-city America. With an original working title of "Let's see life the way it is," the album's seventeen songs reveal a world largely hidden from suburban, middle-class, white America. I was twelve years old when *Songs In the Key of Life* debuted at number one on the pop music charts. I remember listening to the record for the first time with my older brother in our bedroom. Though I was too young and far too insulated to grasp the social and racial complexity of the songs, I was mesmerized by the music. Forty years later, I am still mesmerized, and the full genius of Wonder's artistry still eludes me. Today, when I introduced his music to my students, I never cease to wonder at the way the encounter with such an artist opens their social horizons, much as mine were broken open as a child. Track three, for example, "Village Ghetto Land," layers images of "life the way it is" for the poor in the inner city over the serene and cultured instrumentation of a chamber quartet:

Would you like to go with me / Down my dead end street
Would you like to come with me / To Village Ghetto Land
Children play with rusted cars / Sores cover their hands
Beggars watch and eat their meals / From garbage cans¹

Two tracks later, as if to say, *Don't think you understand me or my people now*, Wonder delivers "Sir Duke," an infectiously funky tribute to the genius of Duke Ellington and other black artists, followed by "I Wish," a joyful remembrance of growing up on the streets of Detroit, "Knocks Me Off My Feet," an exuberant love poem, and "Pastime Paradise," a symphonically mesmerizing cautionary tale about the search for meaning and hope in history. "Isn't She Lovely" celebrates the birth of Wonder's daughter, Aisha, followed by "Joy inside My Tears" and "Black Man," all hymns to what it *feels like* to be alive, black, and proud, in America. Like turning a many-faceted diamond, now this way, now that, Stevie refracts the mosaic colors of life as it is for many in inner-city America, life held down to street level.



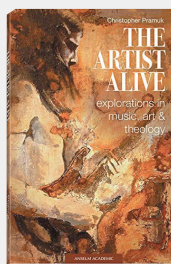
Listening to the album today, one might be tempted to celebrate just how much things have changed in a so-called post-racial America. Or, to the contrary, one might lament how far too little has changed at street level for peoples of color in the United States. In any case, what most interests me is not the insight into so-called “ghetto life” that Stevie Wonder’s music gives us, gives me, as a middle-class white person in America. What interests me is the critique of the *racially unconscious white listener* embedded in his music, an aspect of his legacy I didn’t really notice, much less appreciate, until I was much older.



For white listeners like myself, Wonder’s artistry facilitates a potentially painful realization: namely, my own nearly complete social isolation from black experience in America, my own “confinement in the prison built by racism,”² and the degree to which my own white habitus or groupthink conditions my very manner of seeing and judging reality. In other words, the opening of “Village Ghetto Land”—*Would you like to go with me, down my dead end street?*—still resonates today as both an accusation and an invitation: an accusation of social blindness but also an invitation to come and see life in these United States of America more intimately and clearly than I may have seen it before. To say yes to the invitation is to discover that what is at stake is not my grasp of so-called “black experience”—as if all such experience were monolithic (it certainly is not)—so much as the music of life itself, life in the key of humanity: black, white, brown, red, yellow. It is about the dance of human relationships, sorrowful and joyful, broken and redeemed. I’ve often wondered, how strange, sad, and beautiful, that Stevie Wonder, a blind man, would be teaching me how to see.

“The lamp of the body is the eye,” says Jesus. “If your eye is sound, your whole body will be filled with light; but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be in darkness. And if the light in you is darkness, how great will the darkness be” (Matt. 6:22–23). Repeatedly in the Gospels, Jesus is seen healing the blind, both literally and figuratively. Yet, for me, the most compelling of all these miracles is the one that did not “take” the first time: his encounter with the blind man of Bethsaida. “Putting spittle on his eyes [Jesus] laid his hands on him and asked, ‘Do you see anything?’ Looking up he replied, ‘I see people looking like trees and walking’” (Mark 8:23–24). Of course Jesus finishes the healing and sends the man on his way. But it is the man’s shadowy, in-between state of partial sight and partial blindness that seems to me an almost perfect metaphor for our human condition. Slow the story down and stretch it out over the course of a lifetime, generations, and then centuries, and the blind man of Bethsaida, *before* Jesus finishes the job, becomes a fitting parable for race relations in America. We are all still on the way, each of us stumbling forward in partial blindness, seeing people “looking like trees and walking.” Yet through the eyes of faith, Christ is there, hidden in light and shadow, calling us forward into our freedom—freedom for love, for transformation, for solidarity. . . .

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1. Stevie Wonder, *Songs in the Key of Life*, Motown Records, 1976. The original vinyl release included seventeen songs. An additional four songs were released with the special edition version of the original LP and are included on most CD versions of the album.
2. The phrase is borrowed from Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in Contemporary America* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010).