religions

MDPI

Article

The Black Church and the Juke Joint: The False Dichotomy of Black Identity, Black Music, and Black Space in *Sinners*

Solomon W. Cochren

Department of English and Modern Languages, Alabama A&M University, Huntsville, AL 35810, USA; swcochren@gmail.com

Abstract

This article examines the assumed dichotomy between the Black church and the juke joint within African American cultural discourse. Often portrayed as moral opposites—one sacred and the other secular—this study argues that such a binary reflects a Eurocentric interpretive framework rather than the actual historical realities of Black communal life. Through cultural and historical analysis, the article asserts that both institutions originated from similar conditions of racial exclusion and served as complementary spaces that nurtured African American identity, resilience, and community connections. Using the film *Sinners* as a key cultural text, the study explores how contemporary media narratives complicate rigid distinctions between sacred and secular Black spaces, identities, music, and spirituality. The character Sammie illustrates the permeability between these spaces, embodying a cultural logic where spiritual refuge and expressive release coexist. The analysis places this view within the African philosophical concept of *Ubuntu*, which emphasizes relational identity and the inseparability and oneness of the Black community. Drawing on the scholarship of James H. Cone, the article also shows that spirituals and blues share roots in African diasporic musical traditions. These traditions demonstrate the deep interconnection between religious and secular forms of Black expression. Ultimately, the study concludes that the Black church and the juke joint should be understood not as opposing institutions but as interconnected cultural spaces that collectively sustain African American spiritual, social, and artistic life.

Keywords: Black church; juke joint; African American culture; blues; Ubuntu

Check for updates

Academic Editors: Andre E. Johnson and Denise Burgher

Received: 3 January 2026
Revised: 10 March 2026
Accepted: 14 April 2026
Published: 17 April 2026

Copyright: © 2026 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license.

1. Introduction

Ryan Coogler's film *Sinners* made a major impact on the media industry. It broke box-office records and led to new film-contract deals between the director and film companies. *Sinners* filled a cinematic void during a time when theaters were not offering movies that drew large crowds to their overpriced concessions, reclining seats, and stadium-style venues. I believe *Sinners* itself was the cinematic expression of the Black church cliché, "for such a time as this!" Its media influence created a ripple effect beyond the film industry. Coogler's film sent shockwaves through academia, the Black community, and Western culture. None of these were prepared for what *Sinners* would evoke and produce. Think tanks and online discussions rapidly emerged, exploring themes like spirituality, music, Black horror, juke joints, Black churches, representation, and more. Lazarus Siafa shared on Medium in his article Myth, Metaphor, and Meaning: A Deep-dive Into the Overwhelming Symbolic Architecture in *Sinners*. "Religion: faith, power, and doubt. Culture: trauma, memory, and resistance. Music: the double-edged sword. Characters: scars, survival,

and agency. Vampires: colonizers, assimilation, and appropriation. The architecture of survival." (Siafa 2025).

Since Siafa has led with religion, this work will follow suit. *Sinners* has prompted me to reconsider the overtones and undertones in the complex historical dichotomy of the Black Church and the Juke joint. However, this exploration will also require me to address the dichotomy of Black identity represented in Smoke and Stack—the duality of Black music reflected in blues and spirituals/gospel. Ultimately, *Sinners* and this work question whether there is an authentic dichotomy among these Black elements of space, music, and identity. The answer is no. However, investigating this claim will help situate Black spaces, music, and identity in their proper context and expression. The idea behind the term dichotomy aims to create and sustain a division. When it comes to Black culture and community, this division raises concerns, and I argue that it is more Eurocentric than Afrocentric in its perspective. The effort to maintain a split and categorize aspects of Black culture has never been driven by Black people.

The protocol of African culture is a continual practice of promoting peace, love, unity, and harmony. Africans are deeply dedicated to the oneness of their people and their God(s). As Ewuoso and Hall share, "*Ubuntu*, a term originating from the Nguni Bantu languages of South Africa, is more than just a word; it is a philosophical concept that captures the essence of humanity and communalism. The term is often translated as "I am because we are," emphasizing the interconnectedness and interdependence of individuals with the community." (Ewuoso and Hall 2019). The values and beliefs of oneness and interconnectedness expressed in Black communities across Western civilization today are rooted in African traditions. The BBC states, "*Ubuntu* encapsulates the moral ideals of sub-Saharan Africa. Among the African communities around important rituals, birth, and death, you'll always find communities coming together to support each other." (BBC 2022). Dear and close friends in the Black community go beyond simply calling each other friends or best friends. These terms can suggest a divide and dichotomy. To address this, Black people often eliminate this divide by referring to dear and close friends as "cousin," "brother/sister," or "family." This practice is also common when addressing Elders, as Black youth refer to Elders as "Auntie," "Unc," "Mom," or "Dad." Bukunmi Ajitoni echoes this, saying, "By emphasizing the importance of relationships and communal support, *Ubuntu* provides a framework for understanding and practicing ethical behavior, fostering a sense of solidarity and unity among individuals." (Ajitoni 2024). While *Ubuntu* originated in South Africa, its philosophy has a strong presence in African and Black communities worldwide, especially in North America.

At first glance, some aspects of Black culture appear dichotomous; the narrative that the Black church and its parishioners have no connection or significance with the Juke Joint and its patrons. Black Christians often describe themselves as "saints" and others as "sinners," creating a narrative of us versus them, good versus evil. I use the film *Sinners* and the role of Black church/Black religion in it to challenge the idea of a strict separation between the Black church and the juke joint, between church parishioners and juke joint patrons, and between blues and spirituals/gospels. These elements of Black culture have never been constructed as either-or but as yes-and. Therefore, when a dichotomy is suggested in African American culture, it is important to recognize that it stems from a Eurocentric perspective. This is vital because African life is deeply rooted in religious values and beliefs.

As African culture is rooted in the practice of *Ubuntu*, which means "I am because we are," it emphasizes interconnectedness and unity. African spirituality forms the foundation from which these practices emerge. It is not just a part of African life; it is the core foundation of life for Africans. Awodele Ifayemi discusses the prominence of spirituality in

Africa and among its people. "Spirituality is not something that can be separated from the everyday world. It is integral to who they are and how they live their lives. It is a belief system based on the idea of a supreme being or creator, and it emphasizes the importance of living in harmony with nature." He continues, "African spirituality is founded on the belief in the interconnectedness of all things. This belief is reflected in the way that Africans often see themselves as part of a larger whole, rather than as separate individuals." (Ifayemi 2023). Jacob Olupona, a professor of indigenous African religions at Harvard Divinity School and a professor of African and African-American studies at Harvard's Faculty of Arts and Sciences, states, "African spirituality simply acknowledges that beliefs and practices touch on and inform every facet of human life, and therefore African religion cannot be separated from the everyday and mundane." (Chiorazzi 2015). Regarding the term 'religion,' Olupona explains that it is problematic in African discourse; there is an understanding that religion is separate from other aspects of culture, society, and environment. "Religion informs everything in traditional African society, including political art, marriage, health, diet, dress, economics, and death." (Chiorazzi 2015).

The connection between African and African American spirituality lies in the transfer of beliefs, values, and practices across generations. Since Africans are the creators of the oral tradition, a vital part of religion and spirituality survives the trans-Atlantic slave trade through this oral heritage. As a result, Africans were forcibly taken into the colonized world with spirituality as their foundation and the philosophy of *Ubuntu* as its guiding and defining principle. The idea of dichotomy met the enslaved Africans on the plantation and in the colonization of their spirituality and religion. However, the film *Sinners* challenges this dichotomy embedded in African American culture and spirituality. *Sinners* serves as a tool to demonstrate the breaking down of the divide between the Juke Joint and the Black Church, saint and sinner, gospel and blues, arguing that these spaces, identities, and music were never meant to serve as sources of separation but as points of unity.

2. Black Space (The Church and the Juke Joint)

African Americans face limitations in the spaces where they can be their authentic, unapologetic selves. The effort to control and oppress Black life was a constant workload for white colonizers and their descendants, who were often intentional and passionate in this work. The desire for spaces of peace, harmony, joy, celebration, and community is a persistent goal for the Black community. Terrion Williamson highlights this, explaining, "Black social life is, fundamentally, the register of Black experience that is not reducible to the terror that calls it into existence but is the rich remainder, the multifaceted artifact of Black communal resistance and resilience that is expressed in Black idioms, cultural forms, traditions, and ways of being." (Williamson 2017). Williamson suggests that spaces such as the hair salon, the front porch, the street corner, the house party, the backyard barbecue, and the church basement were where Black people gathered, confronting "that same pain and that same pleasure" that define Blackness (Williamson 2017).

The Black church has served as a sacred space for both enslaved and free Blacks. It symbolizes hope, peace, protection, love, and resilience. It is a place where Black people could share their pain, hardships, broken hearts, and exhaustion with a community led by the Black preacher. Here, they could work through emotional, psychological, and physical traumas or simply find a space to rest their hearts, minds, and bodies. On the surface, the Black church clearly functions as a refuge. The brutal history of enslavement, auction blocks, sharecropping, lynching, rape, Jim/Jane Crow, segregation, and laws that supported these atrocities—while ignoring those it harmed—made turning to the Black church and a Black God a logical response to a system aimed against their very existence. Black people needed the "Big" Joker; if this experience could be compared to playing Spades, they knew

they would need something stronger than those who perpetrated slavery, injustice, and inequality could withstand. The Black church became that space—offering both relief and resilience for the Black community.

One of the main misconceptions about the Black church is that it has been viewed as the Black community's single most extraordinary institution, and other Black institutions have been seen as rivals, especially the juke joint. To suggest that some other place outside the Black church could be equal in its role, place, and significance within Black social and spiritual life. The blues found a home in the juke joint, and the Black church often called the blues "the devil's music." One Mic History shares, "the story of Charlie Patton, a pioneering bluesman who mastered music through traditional hymns and spirituals sung faithfully at his local church. When Patton embraced the blues, swapping out Sunday mornings for smoky Saturday nights, he faced alarm and outright hostility from church elders and family alike. Patton's love for the blues/juke joint was not only controversial but viewed as an outright transgression. Church leaders openly branded blues music and the guitar as the devil's business." (One Mic History 2025). The juke joint offered a refuge for the blues, and if the blues is considered the devil's music, then the juke joint was seen as the devil's home, placing it in opposition to the Black church. This is understandable given the Black church's role in Black people's emancipation, desegregation, voting rights, and civil rights. David Williams suggests, "The Black Church is the longstanding institutional backbone of the African American community and represents the collectivistic culture interwoven into the fabric of the lives of African Americans. It has been a locus of hope, spiritual guidance, and social support for African Americans." (Williams et al. 1999). From this perspective, the narrative of the juke joint would be framed as the opposite of the Black church, representing something that opposes what the Black church stands for. The ideas of good versus evil, right versus wrong, and moral versus immoral become the common language used to describe the Black church and the juke joint.

The juke joint was, in fact, equally as vital to the Black community as the Black church. It was another cornerstone of this idea. Zora Neale Hurston states, "musically speaking, the juke joint is the most important place in America." (Hurston 1969). According to Stephen Henderson, "Hurston understands the jook (juke) is not only an evocative word that creates all energy, but one that she concretizes and fills with definite meaning: it is a localized and historicized space that is the 'cradle' of much of the Black music and dance, a space marked by intensity, energy, and sexual charge, and the place where some of the most dynamic social exchange among Black men and women took place." (Kumar 2021). The juke joint was more than just a shack or abandoned sawmill. Korsha Wilson describes juke joints as "a space (world) of escapism through drinks, music, and dance in the segregated South. Wilson suggests, "At their heart, juke joints are more informal bars, where food and liquor are cheap, the hours are late, and the vibes are all about Black culture." (Wilson 2024). Traditionally, juke joints have been portrayed as dirty, dingy, and dangerous. The narrative of undesirable and unfit for proper Black life had taken hold early. Toni Tripton-Martin, in her publication "Juke Joints, Jazz Clubs & Juice", states, "juke, or jook, is believed to be rooted in the West African word juga, meaning bad or wicked, or the Gullah word juk, meaning infamous and disorderly." (Tipton-Martin and Conerly 2023). However, Tripton-Martin continues to explain that subscribing to this negative representation causes most people to miss the full picture of the juke joint. The juke joint was more complex than just a dingy, disgusting, and dangerous place. As Tripton-Martin understands it, the juke joint was a rich narrative of Black innovation for Black people and Black culture.

Juke joints originated during slavery. According to Michael Erlewine, "Juke joints were believed to have arisen after the emancipation, when Jim-Crow laws forbade Blacks from entering white establishments. However, the facts show that juke joints existed long before

that, as early as there were plantations and slaves." (Erlewine 2023). Enslaved Black people gathered on Saturday nights to eat and socialize—a time of relaxation and enjoyment after a torturous week. Births, funerals, and harvests were occasions for celebration not only in the Black church but also in the juke joint. These places of celebration and escape could be found in the deep rural South, away from judgmental Christian values. Like the Black church, the juke joint was built by Black hands on land acquired from white landowners. However, the location of the juke joint had less to do with avoiding judgment from church members and more with steering clear of detection and harassment from police, white people, and the dehumanizing environment created by slavery, segregation, and Jim Crow. It is important to recognize that those experiences made it dangerous for Blacks to patronize clubs and bars closer to the cities or towns occupied by whites. Black people created their own safe spaces—the juke joints—and they alone knew their locations.

The juke joint, like the Black church, was a place where Black people would wear their best clothes; it was common to see men in suits and women in attractive dresses. The same energy and care given to dressing for Sunday morning were also expressed on Saturday night. Danni Rose's father owned Haywood's Place in Birmingham, AL. She notes, "If you don't see a linen suit on an 80-year-old man, it ain't a juke joint." (Tipton-Martin and Conerly 2023). Black people had few options for escape from worries, pain, and troubles; the Black church and the juke joint offered that relief. Waiting until Sunday morning for a sense of release may have been unrealistic. This is one of the main themes that lead this work to suggest that there is no dichotomy between the Black church and the juke joint. In fact, I would argue that the juke joint is equally important as the Black church in Black culture and community. An iconic artifact that shows this is Ernie Barnes' The Sugar Shack (1976). "Filled with elongated, muscular figures. The Sugar Shack was based on the artist's childhood memory of sneaking into a local Black club in segregated North Carolina to experience what he called the "sins of dance." Strong diagonals in the floorboards, staircase, and cone of light reinforce the sense of motion created by the figures' swaying bodies and expressive gestures." Explained by the Blanton Museum of Art (2024). The Sugar Shack portrays a juke joint and has become a symbol of Black freedom, harmony, joy, and relief.

It is not entirely clear when juke joints first appeared. However, what is clear is that the juke joint and the Black church have always been pitted against each other. This is ironic, given that both are the product of what white society told Blacks they could not have or where they could not exist. The Black church was born out of the denial of access to be equal members in white churches. The juke joints were the response of Blacks being told they were not welcome to celebrate in the same spaces as white people. As both institutions were regulated in their worship and celebration, a dichotomy was also emerging to divide these pillars of Black social life and expression—implying that participation in one meant exclusion from the other, or that loving one meant hating the other. The problem with this view is that it assumes one is entirely good and the other entirely bad. This idea has been a declaration that suggests divine favor is only with the Black church, while the devil plays the guitar in the juke joint.

Recalling how Africa views its people, culture, and community, this idea of dichotomy/division is problematic at best and destructive at worst. This Eurocentric narrative of Christian fundamentalists seeks to erode the Black community of the elements it needs to thrive—harmony, connection, and oneness. These are the essentials for Black life to survive, especially outside Africa. Different beliefs within African culture did not necessarily lead to immediate separation, especially when they maintained core cultural values of harmony, connection, and oneness. At the same time, the Black church served as a space to preserve certain aspects of African religious and cultural traditions, such as the ring shout. The juke joint was another Black space where the same cultural traditions were practiced—call and

response and the celebration of life and death. The juke joint was never a space of competition with the Black church; in fact, no authentic Black space was created with the idea of a dichotomy in mind. Both offered and sought to provide Black people with what they could not find on the plantation fields, in the enslaver's mansion, or through sharecropping. The belief in and expression of God were not limited to the Black church; God was invoked, discussed, and praised in the juke joints. James Cone states, "It is not that the blues (in the juke joint) rejected God." (Cone 1972). Sandra Barnes and Benita Blanford-Jones assert, "In essence, the juke joint and God are not necessarily in opposition but represent different avenues for Black people to obtain harmony, connection, oneness—in a word, refuge." (Barnes and Blanford-Jones 2019).

Sinners have torn down the veil that separated the Black church from the juke joint. The film begins with Sammie (preacher boy) feeling overwhelmed by Saturday night's events as he drives to church. His father, the church's pastor, tells Sammie to leave his "sinning" ways and to put down the guitar. While seeking refuge in the Black church, Sammie was unwilling to confess that he was turning away from the experience the juke joint offered. This exchange of Sammie going to the church in his moments of distress and his reluctance to give up the guitar—is key to understanding the strong bond between the Black church and the juke joint. The Black church provided Sammie with a safe space and spiritual protection. Yet, when his hands reached for the guitar, they revealed his need for freedom, joy, and expression—the very things the juke joint offered. The Black church was a space for honoring God and maintaining one's spiritual connection, while the juke joint celebrated the body and mind that had endured some of the most torturous conditions. These spaces were not in conflict but complemented each other. Sammie showed that Black people need both the Black church and the juke joint as expressions of harmony, connection, and oneness.

3. Black Identity

Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) states that Black Christians' desire to use the Black church as a tool for progress in America was a key factor in creating the divide between the Black church and the juke joint. He explains, "The Black gods were thrown into disrepute first, and that was easy since they were banned by the whites anyway. The growing Black middle class believed that the best way to survive was to disappear completely, leaving no trace at all that there had ever been an Africa, or a slavery, or even, finally, a Black man. This was the only way, they thought, to be citizens." (Jones 1963). Kristian Smith points out that fundamentalist Christianity controls relationships. "To be in relationship with other Christians is highly encouraged and promoted. There is an undertone that you can only be in a relationship with other Christians. Your relationship is built on shared beliefs, and once your beliefs start changing, you realize you don't have anything in common, and there is a separation that takes place. They don't want to deal with you anymore because you don't believe the same thing. The fear is rooted in the belief that if one's belief shifts, one loses one's entire community. Their friendships and relationships are used as a form of control because they tell you who you can be friends with, and no one wants to leave their community because that is a basic human need." (Smith 2025). Sandra Barnes and Benita Blanford-Jones assert that the Black church and the juke joint, at the very least, have blurred boundaries. "Some Black families and communities existed in a space where these seemingly opposite institutions overlapped, with some individuals attending both church on Sunday and juke joint on the weekend." They continued, "Families sometimes blended religious and secular beliefs to achieve practical and financial goals, showing the complex ways in which faith and secular life intersected for survival and well-being." (Barnes and Blanford-Jones 2019).

The African belief in harmony, connection, and oneness cannot be fully realized or expressed within Black American communities when sharp distinctions are being drawn. For those outside the Black church, Black parishioners often label them as "sinners." This creates a division and fracture within the community. Both Black parishioners and "sinners" live, work, and shop in the same spaces, yet an invisible barrier separates them. However, the dichotomy between sinners and Black parishioners is not as clear-cut as many believe. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, the definition of sinner is "a person who" transgresses against divine law by committing an immoral act or acts." (Cambridge Dictionary n.d.). Unfortunately, the term "sinner" in the Black community has overtones of separation based on different theological and spiritual practices. Many of these practices that the sinner adheres to or disregards are not rooted in factors that create disharmony, division, or disrespect within the community. Simply put, the identification of the "sinner" has less to do with disharmony, division, or disrespect to the Black community and more to do with what Smith describes as Christian nationalism. If you do not believe how we believe, then you are an outcast, you are a "sinner".

The Black patrons of the juke joint have never shown hatred toward God or the Black church. Many love God and the Black parishioners, who are often family members, co-workers, and neighbors. These patrons have chosen to express their connection to the same God of the Black parishioners through different practices and spaces. In their early careers, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X were seen as being at odds and having no common ground. The Nation of Islam (NOI) faith and Black Christian faith were often presented as a dichotomy. What's rarely discussed is that many families have members who were both parishioners of the Black church and members of the NOI. These families managed to find common ground; even if they held different theological beliefs, they shared concerns and a common enemy. Reports indicate that King and the NOI have had conversations and expressed mutual respect and friendship. Stanford University's Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute published a letter from King about an invitation to speak to members of the NOI from the honorable Elijah Muhammad on 9 April 1958 (King 2005).

It is documented that later in 1966, King and Elijah Muhammad had a private meeting at Muhammad's Chicago home. An invitation to someone's house does not typically happen between enemies; usually, there is a neutral place for such encounters. Muhammad's invitation to King to his home, a space where Black people find peace, security, and sanctuary, provides insight into how each man respected and valued the other. Danielle Buckingham echoes this idea in her article, 'A home is more than a house: Black folks reflect on what home means to them.' "Given all this, where can Black folks find solace from what can often be an unwelcoming outside world? The obvious answer would be at home, but home is so much more than the place where we lay our heads at night." (Buckingham 2022). Buckingham includes Ida Harris's description of Black homes as, "a tangible representation of my identity but performs more like an archival space, housing the more intimate details of who I am".

This respect and value between King and Black Muslims (NOI) did not end with Elijah Muhammad. In his book *The Sword and the Shield: The Revolutionary Lives of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr.*, Peniel Joseph connects the lives of these two religious leaders. Joseph suggests King and Malcolm X had "convergent visions" for Black America—but their strategies for achieving these visions were shaped by their different upbringings (Gross 2020). Furthermore, Joseph argues, "With the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, King and Malcolm X's visions have converged: What's really extraordinary is that the Black Lives Matter protesters really are protesting for radical Black dignity and citizenship and

see that you need both. So, Malcolm and Martin are the revolutionary sides of the same coin, and really, the BLM movement has amplified that." (Gross 2020).

James Cone, the pioneer of Black Liberation Theology, was a Bill and Judith Moyers Distinguished Professor of Systematic Theology at Union Theological Seminary. He was one of the first scholars to challenge the simplified public images in his book *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare*. In his review of Cone's book, Michael Eric Dyson states, "Cone integrated elements of traditional Black church life (discourse about justice, God, and judgment) with radical social ideas (Black power, a Black God, and trenchant criticism of white racism. Here was a Black man trained like Martin who spoke like Malcolm, an X in King's clothing." (Dyson 1992).

After becoming more experienced and comfortable with their respective roles and understanding of American racial discourse, King and Malcolm developed a friendship and mutual respect. Cone acknowledges that, "Martin and Malcolm needed each other, that their ideas and social strategies brought them to a strange but effective symbiosis." (Dyson 1992). There are clear reasons in their tenure as leading figures of Black civil rights; what set them apart was their methodology, but their shared goal of Black equality, dignity, and unity remained constant. At the intersection of their work and as their paths crossed, the concept of "sinners" was not worth considerable thought. The life, unity, and harmony of Black communities overshadow labels of division and discord, which both Malcolm and King gave their lives to dismantle. Cone embodied the personification of deconstructing the dichotomy between Black Christians and Black non-Christians (sinners). His identification as both Malcolm X and King was not limited to his scholarship; it was reflected in his public life. Cone helps to illustrate that Black identity is far too complex and far from a monolith to draw firm lines in the metaphorical "sand". Black identity in religious and secular spaces is intertwined with grey areas and overlaps, mutually constitutive and mutually reliant. To demand that Black people take a rigid stance on one side or another is impossible. Those who have tried this approach have failed, to their own detriment.

Sammie "Preacher Boy" is disrupting the dichotomy in Black religious identity. He loves both the Black church and its people, as well as the juke joint and its people. Sammie refuses to pick a side or a group to identify relationships and connections. He identifies with both, and both identify with him—his father admonishes him to stay and work on the Sunday morning service. But Sammie refuses because his people need him at the juke joint Saturday night. Still, he promises his father he will be back for Sunday service, which is where the film begins. Sammie understood what many have ignored or omitted. The parishioners of the church and the patrons of the juke joint both worked in the same cotton fields as sharecroppers, in the same white homes as domestics, and in white-run establishments. Sammie will not let either the church or the juke joint force him to choose between them.

Sammie's stance aligns with African spiritual practices. J. Omosade Awolalu affirms Sammie's position by stating, "Morality is deeply tied to the well-being of the community and the correct functioning of human relationships." (Awolalu 1976). The core of Black spirituality revolves around maintaining harmony within the community and relationships. Meanwhile, Sammie's father represented Black church authority, striving to reinforce boundaries. Sammie and the patrons of the juke joint showed no discord or division regarding the church or Sammie's father. The juke joint patrons were more intentional and committed to building and sustaining a community for all Black people. This is evident in Smoke and Stack, as they seek the skills of Black residents in Clarksdale, Mississippi, who contribute to building the juke joint and actively participate in its celebration and camaraderie—through music, singing, dancing, food, and drinks.

Sammie found a strong sense of identity in both the church and the juke joint, as both offered something of value and reverence. The juke joint and its patrons never rejected or expressed disdain toward Sammie because of his connection to the Black church. There was always room for anyone who desired to let go of the pains and troubles of the world. Even though Sammie's father was upset by his decision to spend time with non-Christians (sinners), he was careful not to sever his relationship with his son. Unfortunately, this is not always the case in Black films; *The Color Purple* is one example. There is clear disdain between Shug Avey and her father, Reverend Avey. Reverend Avey disowns Shug for choosing to be a blues singer. However, Sammie's father purposely avoided creating division between himself and his son, despite his feelings about the juke joint. Harmony, community, and oneness were paramount to Sammie's father and his family.

In the opening scene, Sammie's father welcomes him into the church. It is visually apparent that he has been through a traumatic experience. His father makes an interesting request: to let go of the mangled guitar he is tightly holding. That instrument, which connects the Black church and the juke joint (which I will elaborate on in the next section), was a crucial part of this scene. Sammie has faced and experienced the horrors of the world and has come face-to-face with Remmick, the chief vampire, who wants to steal Sammie's gifts for himself. During his encounter with Remmick, Sammie begins reciting scripture and uses the same guitar to defend himself. It is the biblical text (Black church) and the guitar (juke joint) that give Sammie the strength to survive and withstand the terrors of Remmick, who represents the forces of Western culture that seek to suck the blood (life) from everything that gives life to Black communities. Sammie's connection to the Black church and the juke joint helped him survive Saturday night's horror and see Sunday morning's sun. His fierce grip and refusal to release the guitar symbolize more than just holding onto a musical instrument; it means holding onto the community that brings joy, love, harmony, and connection to his life.

Ryan Coogler is artistically unraveling the dichotomy between Black spaces like the Black church and the juke joint. He suggests that both are essential for surviving the institutions, orders, and people committed to eradicating Black life. The character Sammie embodies this aesthetic perspective. Sammie makes no claims of perfection or damnation. He never calls himself or others "sinners" nor seeks to draw dividing lines. Instead, Sammie strives to negotiate unity and harmony between the Black church and the juke joint. He uniquely experiences both spaces simultaneously in his life as he navigates Western culture. Sammie exemplifies that it is possible to love and stay connected to the Black church, the juke joint, and their parishioners and patrons.

4. Black Music

Music is a vital element for Black people and all those of African descent. It is present in nearly every aspect of Black life. Whether in moments of celebration, funerals, spiritual practices, labor, or relaxation, music forms the outer circle of Black life, with spirituality at its core. In the book *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States* Samuel Floyd writes, "The power of Black music is based on the assumption that African musical traits and cultural practices not only survived but played a major role in the development and elaboration of the African-American music." (Floyd 1996). Floyd continues by sharing *that Slave Culture*—as Sterling Stuckey argues—"the ring shout was the main context in which (transplanted) Africans recognized values common to them," suggesting that these values included ancestral worship, contact, communication, storytelling, trickster expressions, and other symbolic devices. The ring shout was a cultural ritual where music and dance merged, combining the musical practices of the slaves with Negro spirituals and other African American musical genres and forms. Within the ring

shout, characteristics and foundational aspects of Black music were preserved—calls, cries, hollers, and call-and-response patterns. Layered within these expressions were unique rhythms foreign to Western culture and music, such as polyrhythms, heterophony, pendular thirds, blues notes, bent notes, hums, moans, grunts, vocables, and other rhythmic-oral declamations. Additionally, hand clapping and foot stomping are vital elements of Black music, especially in the blues and spirituals.

James Cone states, "Black music is unity music. It unites the joy and the sorrow, the love and the hate, the hope and the despair of Black people; and it moves the people toward the direction of total liberation." (Cone 1972). This proclamation cannot be taken lightly. Cone does not create a dichotomy within Black music, particularly the spirituals and the blues. He further explains, "Black music is unifying because it confronts the individual with the truth of Black existence and affirms that Black being is possible only in a communal context." (Cone 1972). The spirituals and the blues construct community and reinforce it. Most Black churches' Sunday morning services start with singing, clapping, and foot-stomping of spirituals. It was calling those whose spirits had been drained, whose bodies had been broken, to be restored and healed collectively. On Saturday night in the juke joint, festivities begin with a blues singer and their guitar calling out to those who have worked in torturous conditions and climates, inviting them to gather and share their troubles and triumphs. I am stating that the call and response practice sets the tone for community, as seen in the church (spirituals) and the juke joint (the blues). This was done to ensure everyone in the space was in agreement. These were places and times not of division or separation but of oneness, harmony, and connectedness. The goal was always a shared expression and experience. It was common for those nearby, who were not actively participating in the church or the juke joint, to be drawn inside. Once inside, they were welcomed as if they were longtime or permanent members.

An example of this appears in the film *The Color Purple*. There is a scene where a female blues singer and the patrons of a juke joint are enjoying themselves on a Sunday morning. At the same time, the local Black church is holding its Sunday morning service as parishioners worship. What is clear is that as the blues invade the space of the church, the spirituals invade the space of the juke joint. Two musical expressions are finding identity and residence in spaces once thought dichotomous. Both the blues and spirituals cause parishioners and patrons to overlook and dismantle all barriers created by a Christian nationalist, Eurocentric perspective. Everyone in the juke joint and the church shares the same space in this scene, and there is no language of binary dividing them. The lines of division have dissolved, and their faces are expressions of acceptance, love, and harmony. No pastor refuses admittance to the patrons, and no blues singer judges the Christians' worship. These are not strangers in the night; these are families and friends of the same God, sharing the same blood and music, seeking the same harmony, unity, and connection. This scene embodies *Ubuntu*. Ironically, it was blues and spirituals that brought Black people together. Musical expressions once thought to oppose each other actually served as the vehicles through which they experienced homogeneity. Amiri Baraka states, "The immediate predecessors of the blues were the Afro-American/American Negro work songs, which had their musical origins in West Africa. The religious music of the Negro also originates from the same African music." (Jones 1963).

James Cone, in his publication *The Spirituals and the Blues*, describes the roles of the blues and the spirituals in the lives of Black people, especially in the South. In his hometown of Bearden, Arkansas, men and women would gather after long hours working in sawmills and factories during the week; by Saturday night, they were exhausted. The need to express their feelings of joy and sorrow, as well as to refresh their spirits through the rhythm of Black humanity, was essential (Cone 1972). Cone emphasized that this need was

fulfilled through the blues and the spirituals. He explained that a group of Black sawmill and factory workers held on to their exhaustion and weariness, seeking another form of musical expression known as "church music" or the spirituals. Sunday morning became their appointed time to express their moods and feelings of joy and sorrow. During these services, spirituals guided Black parishioners from trauma and brokenness toward healing and wholeness. These songs gave Black parishioners the fortitude to 'see what the end is going to be.' For Cone, there was no separation between spirituals and the blues. He recognized their deep relationship, primarily that both are cultural expressions of Black identity. "Black music must be lived before it can be understood." (Cone 1972). If you find it difficult to see these connections in this work, it may suggest that you have not truly experienced the Black life or have not had the privilege of an intimate relationship with it.

The blues, according to Cone, expressed an alternative to the divine promises of the Bible as a way to address the trauma of Black life. This was not a rejection of the church or God; rather, the church and God were not the primary means of confronting the traumatic experiences of Black people. For many, there was a discourse of something that could be articulated amid their suffering. Cone states, "The blues depict the 'secular' dimension of Black experience. . . The blues are about Black life and the sheer earth and gut capacity to survive in an extreme situation of oppression." (Cone 1972). The blues urged Black people to set aside the promises of the "by and by" preached on Sunday morning through the Spirituals, the rewards promised in heaven, and to instead confront and grapple with the realities and horrors at the plantation fields, sawmills, and factories. The blues were influenced by laments similar to those found in the Book of Psalms—laments of everything falling apart, love lost, families eradicated, and the heartbreak of facing a world that despises their very existence. Much of the blues did not offer a resolution, at least not through words or sound. The bluesmen and women rarely ended their songs with a celebration, as many spirituals do. Nonetheless, the blues provided the same release, comfort, celebration, and sense of community as spirituals.

African spirituality is fluid and inclusive, expressed in all facets of Black life, from education and politics to hunting, homemaking, and community welfare. Samuel Floyd states, "In traditional African culture, there was no formal distinction between the sacred and the profane realms of life, or between the material and the spiritual." (Floyd 1996). Floyd further argues that it was the ring shout that fused the sacred (spirituals) and the secular (the blues) music and dance together. From the ring shout emerged unflagging rhythms of shout-and-jubilee spirituals, ragtime, and the less vigorous but equally insistent and characteristic rhythms of 'sorrow songs' and the blues (Floyd 1996). Floyd highlights that the spirituals and the blues were not a dichotomy but rather products of the ring shouts. Both embody the cultural expressions and articulations of the African people. There was never a discourse of "devil" music from the enslaved Africans on foreign soil. However, there was an appreciation and respect for all the forms of Black musical expression produced by Black bodies in response to their oppression, trauma, torture, and longing to return to their homeland and reunite with lost family and loved ones. The musical expressions of Black people were not focused on what divided them, but on what fostered harmony, unity, and oneness. In a society that profited from destroying and dividing enslaved Black bodies, this only called for those same Black bodies to find spaces, identity, and music that promote unity, harmony, and *Ubuntu*.

Carly A. Jensen, in her publication "What They Sang: The Religious Roots of Spirituals and Blues," highlights a statement from Jon Michael Spencer acknowledging that "the blues were not profane or immoral but 'secular spirituals." Spirituals shared the same melodic structures and emotions but replaced religious themes with secular issues (Jensen 2024). Both spirituals and the blues originate from West African spiritualism, according to

(Gussow 2017). They represent different expressions of the same core purpose: providing a space for Black people to voice their experiences and struggles. Neither spirituals nor blues alone could fully embody the harmony, peace, and unity within the Black experience. Instead, both were essential to forging a comprehensive framework for African ontology within Western culture. To be drawn to the sonics of spirituals while ignoring the blues would be difficult—indeed, I would argue impossible. Their similarities create a paradox for Black people: how can one embrace the parishioner or patron without rejecting the other when they are essentially intertwined? Disowning the blues often means disowning the spirituals as well. The blues follow a simple AAB structure, while Portia K. Maultsby states that spirituals generally follow an AAAB or ABAC pattern (Maultsby 1976). These musical structures are explained further in this section.

Dr. James Abbington, associate professor of Church Music & Worship at Emory University's Candler School of Theology, illustrates this commonality in performance during an interview titled *"Music and the Black Church: Traditional vs. Traditionalism*." Abbington identifies the significant similarities between the blues and spirituals in their chord structures. He also notes that, although musicians could have kept the chords the same, a stylistic presentation required by some church leaders meant that what was heard on Sunday morning did not sound exactly like what was performed on Saturday night. Keep in mind that the musicians on Sunday morning were the same ones who performed on Saturday night. These musicians were not interested in presenting an entirely different set of chords and song structures from Saturday to Sunday. From a chordal perspective, the music stays consistent, allowing for a seamless transition from Saturday night to Sunday morning. Jensen states, "Several blues singers admitted they felt torn between their love of Jesus and the blues" (Jensen 2024). Much of this is reconciled through the blues singers' incorporation of spiritual themes and presence. The unspoken tension of musicians playing both in juke joints and churches was never fully resolved.

It is interesting to note that calls or demands from church leaders to their musicians for a different style of playing stem from a desire to avoid Sunday morning sounding like Saturday night. However, Abbington posed a vital question: "How did the parishioners know what the blues sound like? How did the deacons know what happened on Saturday night, because you would think they would be getting their black suits, white shirts, and ties ready for church on Sunday morning?" (Henry 2023). The answer becomes obvious; unless they were patrons of the juke joint, it would be difficult for them to recognize blues music. There was a strangely familiar sound that commandeered their auricular, not enough to disrupt the church service but enough to evoke the senses of the deacons and other parishioners—a sense of nostalgia for the joys, celebrations, and unity experienced last night. Jensen shares this reality: "Many Christian singers used blues instruments and intonation in their spiritual music, while blues singers borrowed Christian themes and vocabulary." (Jensen 2024). Muddy Waters picked cotton in the Mississippi Delta, and the Oak Ridge Baptist Church was a space for him to escape his harsh realities. It was through the church hymns that his passion for music was cultivated. Waters stated, "In order to sing the blues, you had to go to church to get this particular thing in your soul." (Jensen 2024).

Sammie's guitar holds a powerful symbolic role in *Sinners*. When he arrives at the church where his father is preparing for Sunday service, Sammie notices that his guitar is positioned behind his father at the pulpit. His father explains that he brought his guitar to the church and placed it in the pulpit because he wants Sammie to assist with the service. The placement of Sammie's guitar highlights how essential music is to the Black church. Being invited into or placed on the church's pulpit was a sign of honor and respect, a form of elevation given to the person. Sammie's father recognizes that without Black music from a skilled musician, the service would lack its full strength, as spirituals are just as vital

to Sunday mornings as the preaching. The spirituals create an atmosphere of celebration, restoration, and emotional as well as psychological renewal. The sermon confirms through God the experiences and expressions conveyed through the spirituals. Sammie's father is not making this request in the hope that Sammie will bless the church with his gift; his father understands the power and influence of Sammie's gift on the guitar. Smoke and Stack were acquainted with Sammie's talent. The guitar symbolizes both the blues and spirituals, merging them into one. Sammie's guitar is welcomed in both the church and the juke joint because it offers the parishioners and patrons a sense of belonging, resilience, and resistance needed to face tomorrow. Ryan Coogler showed that the guitar is the instrument that creates joy, harmony, unity, and celebration both in the Black church and the juke joint. It is a tool used to break down the false dichotomy constructed to divide, disrupt, and destroy *Ubuntu*. The guitar bridges the gap between the Black church and the juke joint. It is welcomed on Saturday night and Sunday morning, serving as a link between these two spaces with a core goal: not just to survive but to thrive beyond the oppression of Western culture.

5. Conclusions

This study argues that the perceived dichotomy between the Black church and the juke joint is less about Black cultural reality and more a result of Eurocentric frameworks that impose strict divides on African and African American life. Analyzing *Sinners* and the roles of these spaces, this research shows that the Black church and the juke joint are not as antagonistic institutions but complementary sites of refuge, expression, and community survival. Both emerged from the same historical conditions—slavery, segregation, and racial exclusion—and were created by Black communities seeking spaces where they could find dignity, connection, and emotional release in a society structured to deny such freedoms. The Black church has long been recognized as a spiritual and institutional hub of African American life, offering hope, moral guidance, and political organization in the fight for freedom. The juke joint served an equally important cultural purpose. As a space where blues music, dancing, storytelling, and communal celebration thrived, the juke joint allowed Black people to reclaim joy, bodily expression, and cultural creativity after enduring the hardships of plantation labor, Jim Crow segregation, and economic exploitation. Instead of standing in moral opposition, these spaces addressed interconnected human needs—spiritual support, emotional expression, and cultural release.

The film *Sinners* illustrates this interdependence through the character of Sammie, whose relationship with both the church and the juke joint embodies the complexity of Black identity. Sammie refuses the demand to choose between sacred and secular belonging, demonstrating instead that these identities are mutually constitutive. His journey reflects a broader truth about African diasporic culture: spiritual life, artistic expression, and communal belonging cannot be neatly separated. The same cultural foundations—call-and-response, collective participation, and the pursuit of communal harmony—are present both in the Black church sanctuary and on the juke joint dance floor. Ultimately, *Sinners* functions as a cultural text that exposes the artificiality of the Black church–juke joint dichotomy. By depicting characters who inhabit both spaces without contradiction, the film invites audiences to reconsider the boundaries that have long structured interpretations of Black space, identity, music, and spirituality. The Black church and the juke joint, rather than competing for moral authority, emerge as parallel expressions of the same communal impulse: the search for refuge, affirmation, and collective resilience.

Recognizing this interdependence has broader implications for how scholars interpret Black cultural production. When viewed through a framework of opposition, the complexity of African American life becomes simplified into moral binaries that hide the adaptive

strategies Black communities have used for survival. Conversely, seeing these institutions as interconnected allows for a more accurate understanding of how Black culture has historically balanced spirituality, pleasure, resistance, and creativity. Reframing these institutions this way not only clarifies their historical relationships but also emphasizes the lasting adaptability of Black culture. In the face of systemic exclusion, African Americans created multiple spaces of belonging that nurtured the spirit, the body, and the community. The Black church and the juke joint therefore stand not as symbols of division but as twin pillars of cultural survival—each supporting the other within the broader pursuit of harmony, connection, and freedom.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

Ajitoni, Deborah B. 2024. Ubuntu and the philosophy of community in African thought: An exploration of collective identity and social harmony. *Journal of African Studies and Sustainable Development* 7: 1–15.

Awolalu, J. Omosade. 1976. Sin and its removal in African traditional religion. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 44: 275–87. [CrossRef]

Barnes, Sandra L., and Benita Blanford-Jones. 2019. "Jesus and the juke joint": Blurred and bordered boundaries and boundary crossing. In *The Kings of Mississippi: Race, Religious Education, and the Making of a Middle-Class Black Family in the Segregated South*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 115–50.

BBC. 2022. What We Can Learn from the African Philosophy of Ubuntu [Video]. *YouTube*. February 25. Available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7UojwMiRpNM (accessed on 13 August 2025).

Blanton Museum of Art. 2024. The Sugar Shack. Available online: https://blantonmuseum.org/exhibition/the-sugar-shack/ (accessed on 19 September 2025).

Buckingham, Danielle. 2022. A home is more than a house: Black folks reflect on what home means to them. *Reckon*. December 16. Available online: https://www.reckon.news/black-joy/2022/12/a-home-is-more-than-a-house-black-folks-reflect-on-what-home-means-to-them.html (accessed on 9 October 2025).

Cambridge Dictionary. n.d. Sinner. Available online: https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/sinner (accessed on 7 October 2025).

Chiorazzi, A. 2015. The Spirituality of Africa. *Harvard Gazette*. October 6. Available online: https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2015/10/the-spirituality-of-africa/ (accessed on 12 September 2025).

Cone, James H. 1972. *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.

Dyson, Michael E. 1992. Martin and Malcolm [Review of Martin and Malcolm and America: A Dream or a Nightmare, by J. H. Cone]. *Transition* 56: 48–59. [CrossRef]

Erlewine, Michael. 2023. Juke joints and Saturday nights. *Medium*. October 29. Available online: https://medium.com/@MichaelErlewine/juke-joints-and-saturday-nights-8c56f669d45b (accessed on 22 October 2025).

Ewuoso, Cornelius, and S. Hall. 2019. Core aspects of Ubuntu: A systematic review. *South African Journal of Bioethics and Law* 12: 93–103. [CrossRef]

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

Gross, Terry. 2020. Black power scholar illustrates how MLK and Malcolm X influenced each other. *NPR*. August 12. Available online: https://www.npr.org/2020/08/12/901632573/black-power-scholar-illustrates-how-mlk-and-malcolm-x-influenced-each-other (accessed on 2 October 2025).

Gussow, Adam. 2017. *Beyond the Crossroads: The Devil and the Blues Tradition*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Henry, Jermey Q. 2023. Dr. James Abbington on Music and the Black Church: Traditional vs. Traditionalism [Video]. *YouTube*. August 15. Available online: https://youtu.be/ljVh65hocvc (accessed on 12 November 2025).

Hurston, Zora N. 1969. *Characteristics of Negro Expression*. New York: New York University Press.

Ifayemi, Awodele. 2023. African spirituality: The key to a successful life. *Ileifa*. May 1. Available online: https://ileifa.org/african-spirituality/ (accessed on 12 September 2025).
Jensen, Carly A. 2024. What they sang: The religious roots of spirituals and blues. *The Gettysburg Historical Journal* 23: 6.
Jones, LeRoi. 1963. *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*. New York: William Morrow.
King, Martin L., Jr. 2005. To Elijah Muhammad. The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute. Available online: https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/elijah-muhammad (accessed on 9 October 2025).
Kumar, Nita N. 2021. The "Jook" and Zora Neale Hurston's play Polk County. *Lapis Lazuli: An International Literary Journal* 11: 1–11.
Maultsby, Portia K. 1976. Black spirituals: An analysis of textual forms and structures. *The Black Perspective in Music* 4: 54–69. [CrossRef]
One Mic History. 2025. Why the Black Church Tried to Silence the Blues [Video]. *YouTube*. May 25. Available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f-p4GtCCAEw (accessed on 15 September 2025).
Siafa, Lazarus. 2025. Myth, metaphor, and meaning: A deep dive into the symbolic architecture in *Sinners*. *Medium*, April 21.
Smith, Kristian A. 2025. Pastor explains how fundamentalist Christianity controls relationships [YouTube video]. *YouTube*. October 1. Available online: https://youtu.be/SEMHqgLG1F0?si=trFdex9GwQsK-J9G (accessed on 22 December 2025).
Tipton-Martin, Toni, and Brittany Conerly. 2023. *Juke Joints, Jazz Clubs & Juice: Cocktails from Two Centuries of African American Cookbooks*. New York: Clarkson Potter.
Williams, David R., Ezra E. Griffith, John L. Young, Chiquita Collins, and Juallyne Dodson. 1999. Structure and provision of services in Black churches in New Haven, Connecticut. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* 5: 118–33. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
Williamson, Terrion L. 2017. *Scandalize My Name: Black Feminist Practice and the Making of Black Social Life*. New York: Fordham University Press.
Wilson, Korsha. 2024. Once a refuge from segregation, juke joints still inspire Black joy. *Bon Appétit*. March 11. Available online: https://www.bonappetit.com/story/juke-joints-black-joy (accessed on 13 August 2025).

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.