

University of Mississippi  
American Music Archives Field School

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Eric and I arrived at the 102.1 FM station around 12:15 p.m., and we took seats on the couch as we greeted Rev. Kearney. Rev. Kerney wore a white 102.1 FM t-shirt, dark denim jeans, and white Reebok shoes with black dress socks. We made small talk for a while, and I wondered why we were putting off beginning the interview. Eventually, I asked Rev. Kearney if he still had time for an interview, and he answered affirmatively. At some point, he talked with his wife on the phone and arranged to have her bring over microphones for Eric and I to use in the booth. We discussed the intended course of our upcoming interview, and Eric mentioned his willingness to have Rev. Kearney play and discuss some recordings that reflect the transition from traditional to more contemporary forms of gospel music. I seconded Eric's remarks, adding that a survey of this history would be valuable to our project. I meant survey in the sense of an overview of the chronology of gospel music, but Rev. Kerney took it to mean a survey of listeners about their preferences. As this also seemed like a profitable angle to take, I was excited to see where that approach would go.

After Rev. Kearney picked up a bottle of SoBe and some McDonald's French fries, we embarked on our unconventional interview, which was largely a recording of Rev. Kearney's radio programming. He wired our recorder through his sound equipment to enable us to record his broadcast. Before we started recording, Rev. Kerney played the song "Love Train" in the background while he took calls during which listeners gave "shouts out" and affirmed that their favorite radio station was 102.1 FM. Rev. Kerney asked one caller whether he was planting corn or cotton today, and the caller responded that he was fertilizing corn. Kerney inquired as to what type of fertilizer the caller used. The caller said he used liquid fertilizer, and Kerney replied that he was not able to use that. Another caller made reference to the fact that Rev. Kerney's church had held a Tuesday night service that week, and Rev. Kerney said they always meet on Tuesday nights. He told another caller that her mother was looking for her because the caller had failed to show up on Mother's Day. Rev. Kerney also seemed to make a point of referencing his wife's involvement in the radio station, jokingly imploring one caller to say, "Shame on Mrs. Kerney." Through such interactions, Rev. Kerney seems adept at forging a sense of community among his listeners—many of whom he does not know.

Rev. Kerney's habit of using his hands to gesture while speaking follows him into the studio. At some points, he sat with his hands clasped in a bowl shape with his fingers weaved together. As he

instructed a caller to turn down his radio volume in order to decrease the feedback, Rev. Kerney turned down an imaginary volume control with his hand. He remained highly engaged in his conversations with callers even while he performed additional tasks, such as searching for songs on the computer database. When he typed a particular song title into the database, he shifted from his standard position facing the booth's front glass to face the computer mounted on the adjacent wall. I was impressed with the ease with which he performed multiple tasks, and when he did make a mistake, he responded to it quickly and effectively. For instance, he allowed the telephone's "empty line" tone broadcast over the air, quickly pressed a button that stopped the sound, and asked, "What was that?!" in an amused tone, smoothing over the interruption. Sometimes, he seemed to focus more single-mindedly on the caller, with his eyes lowered toward to microphone as if he was envisioning the caller speaking. When a lady sang part of a gospel song, he bounced backward in his chair and flashed a surprised look (widened eyes) in my direction. Following the call, he quipped (on air) that she must have gotten his show confused with American Idol. In general, Kerney's method of hosting his improvised programming brimmed with energy and fluidity. The broadcast has a raw feeling that contrasts starkly with the formulaic broadcasts of most FM radio programming. At the same time, his broadcast was far from amateur. He cultivated a quick, easy rapport with callers, and he spoke directly and rapidly. I got the feeling that he could handle even the most unusual calls effectively, without allowing many awkward moments. For instance, when a woman had difficulty recalling one of the old hymns she said she loved, he played a snippet of an old hymn he had in mind. He asked her if that was the type of song she had in mind, thus alleviating her of the responsibility to recall a song title on the spot and moving the show along without seeming to have inconsiderately interrupting the caller.

Rev. Kearney talked to us off-air during some of the songs he played. He commented on the messages of the songs, the nature of the beat, and where the songs fit into the spectrum of gospel music in terms of traditional versus contemporary. He affirmed that most 102.1 listeners prefer traditional gospel music, a stance borne out by the feedback of the callers during his survey segment. Most callers expressed their appreciation of traditional gospel music. Rev. Kerney expressed his opinion that while contemporary music catches the attention of some listeners, traditional music tends to be the style that "gets you through" trying times.

I sensed that we might have been nearing the point of potentially overstaying our welcome at the radio station (it is, after all, the Kerney's place of employment). Rev. Kerney seemed to be getting a little fidgety. He seems like a high-energy person who might be prone to becoming stir crazy when he remains in the same confined space for an extended period of time. I began gathering up my camera, and I asked Eric if he was about ready to wrap up our interview. He had been in the process of getting Rev. Kerney's signature and biographical information already, but I felt as though the Kerneys were somewhat reluctant to see us leave. Eric and I sat on the couch once again to pack up our equipment, and we continued to talk with Rev. Kerney about gospel music. I had spoken briefly to Mrs. Kerney toward the end of Eric's conversation with Rev. Kerney (I had stepped out of the booth to take pictures of the radio station's central room and of the station's exterior). She had seemed alternately shy and open throughout my interactions with her, but just before we left, she said that Eric and I seemed like family

after the two days we spent with them. She invited us to come back to the station, to go out to dinner with her and her husband at a local steakhouse, and to visit their church in Batesville. Rev. Kerney showed us his ministry's web site. I snapped a couple pictures of him at the computer after I made pictures of him holding a record cover in the studio. We tried to convince Mrs. Kearney to allow me to take her picture, but she protested that she was not looking good enough to be photographed. Rev. Kerney had fun trying to convince her to have her picture taken, and after he put on his dress shirt, he dragged her out of the restroom (where she was probably sweeping—she had been sweeping the central room earlier. He playfully held her while she tried to squirm away from him. I stood up to get in position for a picture in case she changed her mind about being photographed, but she did not. I did not feel comfortable taking her picture while she resisted it—even though she was probably not seriously averse to being photographed—so I refrained from taking her picture. I told the Kerneys that I hoped the southern studies would continue to work with them, and I let them know I plan to visit with them again over the summer.