New Lamont Professor Forges Connections
by Ian Wisekal

M. Roger Holland, II, Lamont’s new teaching assistant professor in ethnomusicology and director of The Spirituals Project (now housed at Lamont), brings an unusual breadth of experience to Denver after his varied and exciting career in New York City. “Who I am is a person at the intersection of music and theology,” said Holland.

With degrees in both of these disciplines from prestigious institutions (Westminster Choir College, Manhattan School of Music and Union Theological Seminary) and extensive experience in both fields, Holland is uniquely qualified to teach students about American musical traditions and to lead the community volunteers of The Spirituals Project choir.

Holland considers himself lucky to have come from a musical family. His mother, a classical singer, began teaching him piano lessons at the age of nine. A few years later, his second piano teacher drafted him to sing in their church children’s choir. When he heard the adult gospel choir at the church, Holland immediately fell in love. “I wanted to learn everything about it,” he said.

Around this time, Holland joined the Boys Choir of Harlem. The first serious choral work he performed with them, J. S. Bach’s cantata Wachtet auf, made a big impression. The choir was joined by the Orchestra of St. Luke’s, one of New York’s premier chamber orchestras, in their concert at Lincoln Center. He remembers thinking, “Wow, this is what real music is like!” The experience spurred him to study music in college.

After his undergraduate work, Holland returned to the Boys Choir of Harlem in many capacities: as instructor, accompanist, as their director of Artistic Education, and as an arranger and director. Highlights of this time were collaborations with the New York Philharmonic and Kurt Masur and recordings with R&B artists Brian McKnight and D’Angelo.

In 1999, Holland came full circle, presenting his own gala concert of Handel’s Messiah at Lincoln Center with his own choir, hiring his own orchestra and soloists. In addition, the choir and orchestra performed some of Holland’s arrangements. He counts the concert among his most meaningful experiences in New York, and hopes to recreate some of that magic at DU.

At Lamont, Holland directs The Spirituals Project choir and conducts the research, outreach and education arms of the organization that was founded in 1998 by longtime DU faculty member Arthur C. Jones, who is also now at Lamont. He also teaches classes that focus on the African-American spiritual tradition and has founded a new choir, the American Heritage Chorale, which explores music spanning many genres and several centuries. That this new choir draws students from outside Lamont energizes Holland.

“I’m really excited about the opportunities for collaboration with faculty in and outside of Lamont, and with groups in the community,” he said. “I want to make people aware of the needs and issues of social justice, and reach out to different departments and schools within DU.” The vision of “One DU” presented by the DU IMPACT 2025 strategic plan is of particular interest. “I would like to be a part of making that happen,” Holland said. And with his vision and ambition, Holland’s impact is sure to be felt across campus.