

Black Gospel Music

Despite its immense popularity, widespread appeal, and influence on American popular music, Afro-American gospel music is a comparably recent music phenomenon. Rooted in the religious songs of the late 19th century urban revival, in shape-note songs, spirituals, blues, and ragtime, gospel emerged early in the 20th century.

The term gospel music suggests many things to different people. In its most general application, the word simply refers to any religious music, regardless of the music's age or origin. Congregational songs, ring shouts, quartets, sacred harp choirs, sanctified groups, and even some work songs would all qualify. Less broadly, the term gospel refers to an innovative, popular style of music combining secular forms, particularly ragtime and blues, with religious texts.

Composed, modern black gospel music became an important style during the 1930s. Thomas A. Dorsey is generally regarded as its "father," although it could be argued that C.A. Tindley should wear that mantle. Tindley was actively composing during the first decade of the 20th century, but his songs did not gain widespread popularity among black until the 1920s and 1930s. Dorsey himself was inspired by Tindley's reworkings of older revival songs, blues, and spirituals. Dorsey's own songs, however, made up the first wave of modern gospel music during the Depression.

Thomas A. Dorsey began his career as a blues and gospel singer. He enjoyed an immensely successful stint as a professional blues musician during the 1920s. By the early 1930s he had turned his attention entirely to religious music. During the 1930s and 1940s Dorsey worked with two influential figures, Mahalia Jackson and Sallie Martin. In addition he toured the country as a performer and lecturer and wrote some 500 gospel songs including "There Will Be Peace in the Valley" and "Precious Lord, Take My Hand."

Reverend Herbert W. Brewster, another important composer from this period, was pastor of the East Trigg Baptist Church in Memphis, Tenn. A contemporary of Dorsey, Brewster composed scores of gospel songs beginning in the early 1930s. Many of his compositions were written specifically for his choir of the Brewster Singers, but two of his songs, "Move on up a Little Higher" and "Surely, God is Able," gained wider popularity.

The music and language of these early gospel songwriters helped to promote an interest in their compositions. Although the compositions of Dorsey and others are formally notated and printed, they almost always undergo a transformation during performance. One of the strong appeals of this music, in fact, is that it encourages participation and improvisation on the part of an audience that feels comfortable with the use of primary chords, standardized chord progression, metaphorical language, and frequent bible allusions.

By the mid-1930s, the appeal of gospel music within black culture was quite evident, and it was soon embraced by commercial record companies wishing to capitalize on its popularity. Radio stations and the major radio networks featured its music on their live broadcasts. These attempts at mass marketing quickly led to a sense of professionalism among the performers. By the onset of World War II a small but growing cadre of people made their living singing, writing, or promoting black gospel music.

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In the decade following 1945 the popularity of groups such as the Spirit of Memphis, Alex Bradford, the Soul Stirrers, Queen C. Anderson, Sallie Martin, and the Famous Blue Jay Singers grew. Dozens of professional and semiprofessional groups appeared on programs throughout the country and recorded for an expanding network of local and regional companies. This interest is well illustrated by Mahalia Jackson's recording of "Move on up a Little Higher" and the Ward Singer's version of "Surely, God Is Able," which both sold a million copies in 1950.

Interest in black gospel music gripped the country and every city and small town in the South staged gospel music programs in churches and auditoriums. New artists such as the Dixie Hummingbirds and Shirley Caesar emerged, initially as second line acts, then as headliners. Soloists such as Ira Tucker of the Dixie Hummingbirds and Claude Jeter of the Swan Silvertones became well known among devotees. Lavish gospel programs were staged by Joe Bostic in New York City and Erskine Fausch of New Orleans. With widespread appeal, groups could afford extravagant costumes and could travel in comfort. Local nonprofessional black gospel groups emulated the dress and singing styles of more popular musicians and even adopted their names. Nearly a half dozen local or semiprofessional groups exploited the "Soul Sisters" name, for instance.

This increasing popularity and professionalism ultimately turned some of the more conservative church members away from contemporary gospel music. By the mid to late 1950s there was something of a backlash against "secularization," most clearly manifested in the opulent manner in which some singers lived.

Black gospel music has changed greatly since the middle 1950s. It has become more sophisticated, particularly in terms of marketing and musical diversity. Popular singers such as William Gaither and Andrae Crouch have had formal musical training and education, which have led to more complicated arrangements.

These changes are part of a natural musical and cultural evolution. Black gospel music changed as the demands of popular culture increased and as Afro-Americans strove toward middle class status. Black gospel music remains, however, essentially conservative, and its principal mission remains constant-to lift the spirits of its participants and to help them express their religion.

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