

## GOSPEL: A LIVING MUSICAL TRADITION

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The Negro Spiritual is a continuation of an African musical tradition that includes songs of praise, work songs, mourning songs and songs of ridicule. The Spiritual almost always laments earthly conditions and readily concedes to the need of spiritual deliverance to a state where all earthly troubles will cease. Reflecting the immediate concerns of the people who created it, the Spiritual is rarely a mere celebration of God's love, power or glory. In the African tradition—Spirituals had a social, educational and political function. They were employed to summon community worship, to instill Christian ethics into young children and to relay coded messages about escape from slavery which only the slaves could understand.

Gospel, however, is another story. Gospel music is a continuation of the Spiritual and readily employs elements of blues, ragtime, jazz and all manner of rhythmic devices found therein. Ironically, one of Gospel's major roots, is the 18th-century English hymn. Somehow, stark images of "fountains filled with blood," "amazing grace," and "Jordan's stormy banks" were more descriptive of the Afro-American post-Emancipation experience than the ornate language of the Spiritual, and when sung in long or common meter in church services provided an opportunity for melodic variation and embellishments by each singer.

Today, hymns such as "The Day is Past and Gone," "Never Grow Old" and "Amazing Grace" can elicit unbelievable emotional response from an audience when sung by a singer who possesses a

mastery of melodic improvisation and a great sensitivity for the lyric.

The road to what we refer to as Gospel is not without some brilliant landmarks personified by certain composers, arrangers, musicians, preachers and singers.

In 1871 the Fisk Jubilee Singers popularized the Negro Spiritual by touring and performing throughout the U.S. and Europe.

Near the turn of the century, C. H. Tindley began composing songs that were neither hymns nor Spirituals. He combined poetic imagery and Black colloquialisms with melodies that appealed to Blacks. Tindley is the composer of "Take Your Burdens to the Lord," "We'll Understand it Better By and By," "Stand by Me" and most notably, "I'll Overcome," known today as "We Shall Overcome."

The most significant Gospel composer, however, is Thomas A. Dorsey, who before his entrance into Gospel music had been a prolific blues composer and pianist. As "Georgia Tom" he accompanied both Ma Rainey and her protegee, Bessie Smith, and provided some of the most notorious double-entendre Blues ever written.

Inspired by Tindley, Dorsey's genius as a poet and Blues musician manifested itself in the well-loved Gospel songs "My Desire," "When I've Done the Best I Can," "I've Got to Live the Life I Sing About in My Song," "Peace in the Valley" and most notably, "Precious Lord, Take My Hand."

A major force behind Dorsey's success was Sallie Martin, a vocalist who traveled with him throughout the country between 1932 and 1944 performing Dorsey compositions, organizing choirs and ensembles, and teaching them arrangements of Dorsey

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