

Washington, D.C./ Gospel Music City, U.S.A.: State of the Art by Pearl Williams-Jones

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For more than a half century, Washington has been an important city in the development, presentation, and preservation of gospel music. The music in many ways reflects the diversity of the city's population, and its development in Washington parallels changes in the community that supports it.

Gospel is an urban Black religious music of rural origin. Its roots reach back to the plantation spiritual of more than two centuries ago. As Black people migrated into northern urban communities such as Washington, they brought along a love for sacred song but needed musical expression that did not bear reminders of the slave past. Gospel music was a synthesis of rhythmic jubilees with their syncopated beats, of simple call and response patterns, and of texts which expressed a hope for freedom. The newer, urban songs from the emerging Holiness and Pentecostal churches used instrumental accompaniment, hymn structures of verse and chorus, and call and response. Texts centered on liberation through salvation and praise, prayer, and testimony about personal experiences.

Gospel music flourished in the D.C. environs through the Black church, its choirs, soloists, and groups. For many spiritual and cultural needs were met through a strong traditional link with music from "down home." The gospel community was further expanded through street meetings and tent services that were frequently held in the 1930s and '40s. Later, radio broadcasts by churches and quartets brought gospel into the homes of D.C. residents. Today, television, concerts, festivals, and competitions add to the variety of means through which gospel has spread into the community. There is sufficient variety and professionalism in gospel music presentations to call Washington "Gospel Music City, U.S.A."

Most of Washington's Black families migrated here from southern states such as Virginia, North and South Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama. Many of these people continue to sing the old songs and transform them into urban gospel. On D.C. streets one can hear the gospel sound in the singing and guitar playing of Flora Molton and Bill Hines. Both have been street singers in downtown Washington for many years and continue their music making for the pedestrians who fill the streets during rush hours. Hines has been at the corner of 9th and F Streets, N.W., for more than a decade, singing unaccompanied with a resonance that can be heard for many blocks around. Molton sits on the corner of 11th and F Streets, next to a department store window, singing "Don't Let the Devil Ride," "Do Lord, Remember Me," and "I Heard it Through the True Vine." Hines' and Molton's music remind us of the transition and transfor-

mation that has taken place in gospel music and gospel singing in Washington over the past fifty years.

Perhaps because of a strong, lingering, southern tradition, gospel quartet music maintains a large, loyal following here. Most quartets are independent commercial organizations that broadcast and give public concerts and church programs. Most of the D.C. based groups can be heard at the well known Radio Music Hall in N.W. Washington's Black community that also houses the all-gospel radio station, WUST, 1120 AM. Many of the quartets that present concerts at the hall may also be heard on the radio station.

One notable group, the D.C. Harmonizers, recently celebrated thirty-five years of quartet singing at the hall. This traditional group of Black male singers sang before approximately 300 fans. Their familiar repertoire of quartet songs, jubilees, gospels, and spirituals was cast in four-part harmony: lead, tenor, baritone, and bass. They were accompanied by a full array of contemporary instruments, including electric lead and bass guitars, drums, and keyboards. Several strong lead singers did not confine their exuberance to the small stage: they moved out into the audience where the listeners could join the group in clapping and singing. Local D.C. groups participated on the program, including The Queens of Faith, an all-female quartet, New Southern Rock Male Chorus, the True Tones, Helen Smith and the Angels of Faith, and special guest, the Swanee Quintet. Their presence indicated the strong ties and support that Washington groups give one another. As if this array of D.C. talent was not enough, flyers circulated through the audience announcing other quartet concerts that would take place in the ensuing weeks. Those groups included the all-female Gospel Pearls, Heavenly Songs, D.C. Kings of Harmony, Martha Christmas and the Gospel Jubilees, the Holy Wonders, and the True Believers. Most of these performers are church-going, Bible believers who enjoy spreading the Word. Their songs are delivered with the fervor of Black preaching, and the songs are chosen from quartet staples which tell of mother and life "down home." Some of the songs on the quartet program at the Music Hall have been around for forty years or more: "When I've Gone the Last Mile of the Way" (*a la* Sam Cooke and the Soul Stirrers), "I've Decided to Make Jesus My Choice," "This Little Light of Mine," and "I'm a Soldier in the Army of the Lord."

The power of radio broadcasting cannot be underestimated in nurturing the presence and ultimate acceptance of gospel music, particularly in many Black churches that once did not allow gospel singing. Many ministers and church musicians objected to gospel singing in the church because it was believed to be too worldly or jazzy in sound. The Hammond organ, tambourines, pianos, and drums, often a common feature of Holiness and Pentecostal worship and gospel music, was an anathema to the more mainstream-oriented Black congregations who patterned their worship after Euro-American Protestant denominations. Most of the Black churches heard on the radio, however, featured some form of gospel singing. In addition, the introduction of gospel disc jockeys helped spread the popularity of gospel singing quartets and groups. In the 1930s Washingtonians listened to national broadcasts of



Bernice Johnson Reagon, singer and scholar of Black expressive culture acknowledges Black church music as part of the foundation of her performance style. Photo courtesy Smithsonian Program in Black American Culture

Wings Over Jordan choir and quartets such as the Southernaires and the Golden Gate Jubilee Singers. The Washington disc jockeys of the 1950s played quartet music and the recordings of soloists such as Mahalia Jackson and Rosetta Tharpe. Soon a gospel audience developed and demanded more gospel music both in churches and on the air.

One of Washington's best known gospel radio preachers is the ninety-year-old Bishop Samuel Kelsey, pastor of the Temple Church of God in Christ for more than sixty years. Bishop Kelsey is part of a long tradition of gospel music in the international Church of God in Christ that has given gospel the Arizona Dranes, Rosetta Tharpe (early recording gospel soloists), The Clark Sisters of Detroit, and contemporary gospel composers and performers such as Andrae and Sandra Crouch and the famous Hawkins family: Edwin, Walter, and Tramaine. Bishop Kelsey, a vigorous preacher, uses a "reader" to line out his scriptures as he preaches. The "reader" reads the scriptures from the Bible while Bishop Kelsey repeats them in a rhythmic call and response pattern. He is famous for his rendition of a Holiness folk gospel, "Little Boy, How Old Are You," that he brought to Washington from his native Georgia and still sings along with members of his congregation. The call and response, uptempo song is based on several verses of scripture that relay the story of Jesus' ministry as a child of twelve.

Among gospel radio personalities Lucille Banks Robinson Miller is the best known. She has produced gospel concerts in Washington for more than thirty years and still maintains a widely listened to broadcast on WYCB, 1340 AM, a 24-hour, all-gospel station. While Madame Miller features traditional gospel and local talent on her shows, other gospel deejays program more contemporary gospel for younger audiences: artists such as Washington's Richard

Members of the Kings of Harmony gospel brass band from the United House of Prayer join the cast of "Mahalia's Song" in a 1983 Howard University production. Photo courtesy of Pearl Williams-Jones



Smallwood Singers whose lead singer and pianist, Richard Smallwood, is a graduate of Howard University's music department. Smallwood's music has been called some of Washington's most distinctive gospel because of its classical overtones.

Bishop Smallwood Williams of D.C.'s pentecostal Bible Way Church has broadcasted for more than forty years and has presented some of Washington's earliest public gospel concerts. While building the church and congregation on New Jersey Avenue, N.W., he sponsored gospel programs by quartets and groups of singers from D.C. and nearby states to help raise funds for those efforts in street corner and tent meeting services. The church and pastor also presented major gospel concerts at the former site of Griffith Stadium where more than 20,000 gospel fans heard the nationally famous Clara Ward Singers, Roberta Martin Singers, Dixie Humming Birds Quartet, Mahalia Jackson, Rosetta Tharpe, and the church's own Radio Choir. During the 1940s and 1950s gospel programs attracted some of the District's largest crowds and clearly rivalled audiences at the famous Howard Theatre, a few blocks away from Griffith Stadium.

Another well known site for commercial gospel presentations, particularly featuring local D.C. talent, was the old Union Hall, a small, one-story building near the U.S. Capitol. D.C. favorites appeared there, including the Wilson Harmonizers, an all-male, blind, *a cappella* quartet featuring Willie Wilson; Bertha Down Wearing; Queen Esther Womble; and the Rosebud Junior Chorus, one of the first gospel choirs featured on a regular weekly commercial broadcast. The Reverend Robert Cherry, gospel singer, pianist, and composer; the Friendship Male Chorus led by Deacon John Minor; Lorraine Gardner Young; the Two Gospel Lights (Mary Lacey Moore and mother); and saxophonist-composer Eddie



Street musicians Bill Hines and Flora Molton perform at the 1975 Festival of American Folklife. Photo by Rosie Lee Hooks, Smithsonian Program in Black American Culture

Simmons formed the early generation of gospel singers in Washington, D.C. Some local composers whose songs were sung nationally included Mr. H.J. Ford, Mrs. Adrue Odom, and Elder Bernard Battle.

A rich vein of traditional gospel music in Washington can be heard at the United House of Prayer for All People. The headquarters of this national organization has been at 6th and M Streets, N.W., for more than fifty years. Within its modern, white brick walls, gold dome, and stained glass windows is heard exciting original gospel singing, preaching, and, of particular note, instrumental gospel. Founded by its famous leader Bishop C.M. Grace in the early 1920s, this Holiness church specializes in brass band music for worship and marches. The Kings of Harmony brass ensemble consists of twelve or more trombonists led by its strong lead trombonist, Norvus Miller, and soloist, the fiery preacher known as Apostle Whitner. With bass tuba and drum, the Kings play in four-part quartet harmony. Their arrangements resemble Black male quartet singing by utilizing the phrasing, vibrato, and timbre of the Black singing voice. The instrumentalists also use the glides, slurs, moaning, and even shouting quality associated with Black gospel singing. Although such deep, personal, and emotional feeling is uncommon in some instrumental playing, warmth and human communication is dominant in the playing of the Kings. Visceral energy and intensity is a driving force in the jubilant worship music of the House of Prayer. The congregation claps, sings, and shouts to the music.

During the turbulent years of Black awareness on college campuses in the 1960s, the Howard Gospel Choir was formed and produced some of the first and finest gospel composers and musicians in D.C.'s history. Among them is Henry Davis, pianist and a founding member of the Voices Supreme, Tony Booker, Leon Roberts, Wesley Boyd, and Donny Hathaway and Roberta Flack whose popular music bore the influences of gospel. The Howard Gospel Choir was one of the first campus gospel choirs in the U.S. While it was tremendously popular with the students, initially the administration and faculty did not understand the place of gospel music in the university setting. However, the will and the skill of the choir prevailed, and eventually they were featured performers at a university commencement ceremony when the Reverend Jesse Jackson gave the address.

Among Washington's best known gospel performers are Mattie Johnson and the Stars of Faith, Myrna Summers, B L & S, the Reverend Conrad Brooks, Robert Fryson, the gospel-rap stylist Frank Hooker, twelve-year-old Tyrone Ford, Shirley Ables, the Steele Family, the Nelson Family, the Reverend Donald Vails, formerly of Detroit, Michigan, the D.C. Chapter of James Cleveland's Gospel Music Workshop of America, a chapter of the Edwin Hawkins Music and Arts Seminar, and the Wesley Boyd Gospel Music Workshop. The Tabernacle Echoes, a semiprofessional choir, has made recordings that are heard nationally. This interdenominational choir of approximately forty voices sings in churches and concert halls and travels to other cities for performances of their contemporary gospel choral style.

Individual outstanding performers from Washington are nation-

ally famous, including the Reverend Wintley Phipps who burst into public recognition when he sang at the 1984 Democratic National Convention following Jesse Jackson's memorable speech. Phipps, who produces his own recordings, is a unique gospel artist whose resonant baritone voice is used with the skill of his classical background and training in music. However, the Reverend Phipps uses his technique with inflections and improvisatory embellishments, fervor, and spirit of Black gospel singing.

Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon is another of Washington's internationally recognized artists whose roots are in the gospel idiom. The daughter of a Georgia Baptist preacher, Dr. Reagon sings gospel hymns of her childhood and the special repertory of the Civil Rights Movement which she performed as a song leader and SNCC Freedom Singer in the 1960s. She uses a voluptuous contralto voice to illuminate the meaning and sentiment of her carefully selected songs of protest, praise, or any other aspect of the Black experience in America or the Diaspora. With her all-female group, Sweet Honey in the Rock, Reagon has sung and recorded the music of many noted gospel songwriters as well as her own original compositions.

In this urban community — where one can hear blues, jazz, rock, rhythm 'n blues, soul, and rap — Black gospel music exerts a tremendous presence and influence. Among its most important functions, aside from its being music for worship, is its role as a medium of community spirit and cultural identity for a large part of D.C.'s Black population. In a city where government is the principal business and community identity can be obscured by the overwhelming image of the national capital, it is often important to have a tangible symbol of one's own distinct importance within the larger whole. Gospel music serves that function. This music connects people to their roots and reaffirms their sense of community.

Suggested reading

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Heilbut, Tony. *The Gospel Sound*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1971.

Levine, Lawrence. *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*. Oxford, London, New York: Oxford University Press, 1979.

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Suggested recordings

Bernice Johnson Reagon, *River of Life—Harmony One* (Flying Fish Records, Inc., FF411).

The Famous Spiritual and Gospel Festival 1965. Recorded Live in Bremen, West Germany, With Bishop Samuel Kelsey and His Congregation from Washington, D.C. (L & R Records GmbH, LR44.005).

Bible Way All the Way "Live." Featuring Elder Michael Rogers, Bishop Huie Rogers in a gospel sermonette, and the Bible Way National Youth Choir (GosPearl Records, PL-16011).

Wintley Phipps, *We Are One* (Serenity Records, SR-1-778).

The Richard Smallwood Singers, *Psalms* (D.C. contemporary gospel music) (Onyx Records, R03833).