

Good News for the Motor City: Black Gospel Music in Detroit

by Joyce M. Jackson and James T. Jones, IV

Since the early 1930s Detroit has been one of the prime centers for Black gospel music. Even though gospel was overshadowed in the 1960s by the pervasiveness of the Motown sound, the sacred tradition always was strong in Black neighborhoods, co-existing with the secular. Through the years the two traditions have influenced each other, and they both have served to meet the constantly changing and expanding needs of the urban Black community.

Prior to the early 20th century most Afro-Americans lived in the rural South. However, with the outbreak of the World Wars, Detroit along with other industrial cities of the North held a promise of economic and social opportunities and personal freedom for southern Blacks, particularly in automobile and related industries. They came in hope of escaping a legal system of discrimination that prevented any improvements of their status. Unfortunately, life in the city did not meet the expectations of the migrants. The practice of discrimination in employment, housing, education and the use of public accommodations forced Blacks to create an alternate life style. A new gospel music more suited to urban life replaced the rural traditions and gave a sense of pride and hope to those who had recently uprooted themselves in pursuit of a dream which seemed increasingly difficult to attain.

This highly emotional and spirit-filled music evolved from the Holiness and Pentecostal churches and first penetrated more established denominations through the “storefront” Baptist and Methodist churches which permeated Black sections of Detroit. Pioneered by Charles A. Tindley (Philadelphia) in the early 1900s and developed and popularized by Thomas A. Dorsey (Chicago) in the 1920s and 1930s, gospel has evolved over the years to encompass many traditions and styles extending from spirituals, hymns and blues to contemporary jazz and soul.

Since the early 1930s Detroit has been the center for a vibrant quartet tradition. The early “jubilee quartets” sang spirituals, jubilees, and hymns in the close four-part harmony *a cappella* style which emphasized an even blend of voices and call and response formal structures. This style became popularized through radio broadcasts and community programs, in addition to appearances in church. In later years many quartets began to add instruments, and lead singers began to assume a more prominent and independent role, a stylistic feature now characteristic of contemporary gospel quartets.

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The Voices of Tabernacle choir perform at the Kentucky Fried Chicken Music competition.
Photo by Kirthmon Dozier, *Detroit News*

The Jewell Jubilees, the Cumberland River Singers, and the Mid-South Singers are a few of the early quartets who were active in Detroit for many years. Some became professionals, touring on a full-time basis. The Flying Clouds, who started in 1929 as the Russell Street Usher Board Four, were regular travelers on national circuits. For more than a decade they broadcasted regularly, first over WJR and then across the river in Windsor, Ontario over CKLW. The Evangelist Singers, later known as the Detroiters, the first Black group to perform on WWG in Detroit, were also full-time singers touring successfully in the '40s with Sister Rosetta Tharpe. Some of the quartets made commercial recordings but on small local labels, hence their obscurity today.

The performance practices, musical arrangements, and popularity of the traditional gospel quartets undoubtedly had a major influence on the emerging rhythm and blues and popular-styled vocal groups that began to appear in the mid-1940s. Detroit was known as a rhythm and blues city, but this secular music was greatly influenced by gospel, adopting not only its vocal and instrumental styles but also arrangements, call-response structure, group makeup, and stylized movements.

With the decline of the male-dominated gospel quartet tradition, female groups began to emerge in Detroit in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Earlier female quartets had sung in the four-part male quartet style, while these newer groups sang three-part harmony arrangements accompanied by piano or organ. The female groups were organized and began traveling to help fill the increasing demands for this deeply moving religious music. One female



group, the Meditation Singers, consisting of Ernestine Rundless, Marie Water, DeLillian Mitchell, and Della Reese, broadcasted on Sunday evenings from the New Light Baptist Church in Detroit, and were one of the first groups to bring gospel music to the secular world by performing in lounges.

The Civil Rights Movement and the 1967 Detroit riots wrought profound changes in the Detroit Black community and in its music. Gospel lyricists began to address themselves directly to the problems and conditions of their communities. During the 1960s the gospel sound stimulated the growth and development of urban Black popular musics, such as Motown, that addressed the “worldly” concerns of Black Americans. This “soul” music adapted many of the principles of gospel music performance: free form arrangements that provided flexibility for lead singers, a semi-preaching style, and additional instrumentation.

This modern gospel sound was popularized by Motown groups such as The Four Tops, The Temptations, and Smokey Robinson and the Miracles. Many Motown performers served their musical apprenticeships in the field of gospel music as members of church or community quartets, groups, and choirs. When Berry Gordy, Jr., moved Motown to Los Angeles in 1973, he left behind a generation of singers and instrumentalists with no commercial outlet. These younger musicians turned to performing in churches and schools. Many of the groups emerged resembling Motown acts, even by the way they dressed. Often, except for the lyrics, a listener cannot tell that the songs are religious. The Rance Allen Group was one of the first groups to gain recognition for a Motown-influenced gospel sound. It reworked the rhythm and blues Temptation’s single “Just My Imagination” as “Just My Salvation.” The danceable sounds of other Detroit groups like the Winans, the Clark Sisters, and Commissioned also confirms the secular influence.

Despite the prevalence and popularity of quartets and groups, Detroit is best known in the gospel world for its mass choirs. Athleia Hutchins and Sally Jones were the forerunners in Detroit’s choir sound, but the Rev. James Loftin, who founded the Church of Our Prayer, really brought a focus to Detroit as a choir town with his



Vanessa Farris singing with the Thomas Whitfield Company. Photo by Kirthmon Dozier, *Detroit News*

Minister Derrick Brinkley and his wife Seleste singing during services at the True Church of the House of Prayer To All Nations, Pontiac. Photo by Kirthmon Dozier, *Detroit News*

300-voice ensemble which gave concerts at Olympia and the State Fairgrounds.

Although famous preachers, composers, and directors like C.L. Franklin, Charles Craig, James Cleveland, and Charles Nicks have played dominant roles, three female choir directors also made their mark. The church community affectionately calls them the Big Three: Elma Hendrix Parham, who organized the women's chorus at the Greater New Mt. Moriah Baptist Church and directed the community youth Ensemble; Mattie Moss Clark, founder of the Southwest Michigan State Choir at Bailey Temple and mother of the Grammy-nominated Clark Sisters; and Lucylle Lemon, former choir director at New Bethel Baptist Church and founder of the Lucylle Lemon Gospel Chorus in 1943.

Contemporary gospel choirs like Thomas Whitfield and Company, Larry Robinson Concert Chorale, Northeast Youth Community Choir, and Ed Smith and the Operation Love Community Choir have packed churches and concert halls. The Donald Vails Choraleers and the Rev. Charles Nick's St. James Missionary Baptist Church Adult Choir have for the last five years continually won the Gospel Music Excellence Awards, presented in Detroit by the Gospel Music Workshop of America (the largest gospel organization of its kind in the United States).

In the 1980s the focus on Detroit as a gospel mecca is stronger than ever. Contemporary gospel continues to borrow elements of style, instrumentation, and performance practice from secular music. Performers create new styles by expanding on musical concepts associated with the past while simultaneously capitalizing on new creative ideas and technological advances. Along with the numerous small ensembles and choirs, gospel soloists such as Vanessa Bell Armstrong are receiving national recognition. Many of these artists have signed with major record labels. In the city more than 400 hours of gospel music command the radio airwaves each week, and Detroit's WMUZ-FM is one of the few 24-hour Christian music stations in the country. *Totally Gospel* and *Spirit Filled*, specifically Black gospel publications, are based in Detroit. The Sound of Gospel and Message Music Productions, two of the country's main gospel recording labels, also make their home in the city.

Despite changes in musical style and content, gospel in Detroit continues to serve a vital function in the lives of many Blacks. It has succeeded in the city on all levels: spiritually, artistically, technically, and commercially.

Suggested reading

Boyer, Horace C. "A Comparative Analysis of Traditional and Contemporary Gospel Music." In *More Than Dancing: Essays on Afro-American Music and Musicians*, ed. Irene Jackson. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985.

Burnim, Mellonee V. "The Black Gospel Music Tradition: A Complex of Ideology, Aesthetic, and Behavior." In *More Than Dancing: Essays on Afro-American Music and Musicians*, ed. Irene Jackson. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985.

Funk, Ray. *Detroit Gospel*, (LP liner notes) Gospel Heritage HT 311, 1986.

Jackson, Joyce M. "The Performing Black Sacred Quartet: A Cultural Expression of Values and Aesthetics," Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 1987.

Jones, James T., IV. "Praise the Lord!" *Michigan: The Magazine of the Detroit News*, November 2, 1986.

Levine, Lawrence. *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.

Suggested recordings

The Clark Sisters, *Is My Living in Vain?* (New Birth, NEW 7056-G).

Detroit Gospel (all a cappella quartets) (Gospel Heritage, HT 311).

Donald Vails and The Choraleers, *We've Come to Praise Him* (Savoy SVL 7069).

The Fabulous Violinaires of Detroit, *Their Greatest Hits* (Checker CH 9127).

Mattie Moss Clark and The Southwest Michigan State Choir, *Humble Thyself* (DME GP 7772).

The Winans, *Let My People Go* (Qwest 1-25344).