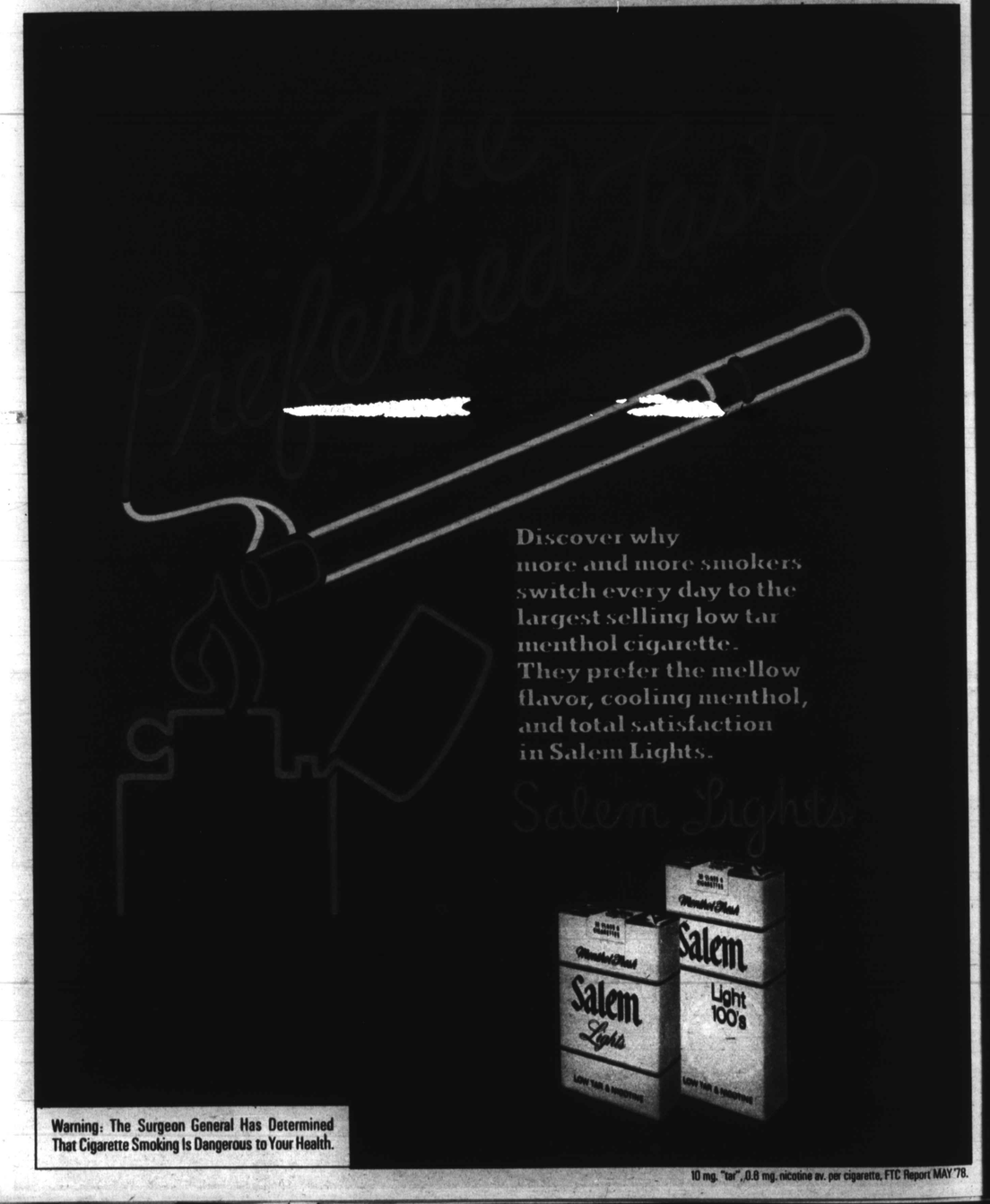
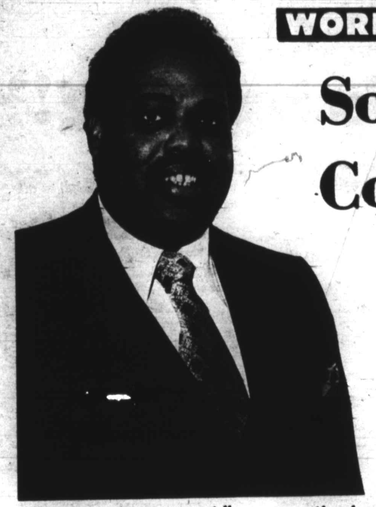


Something Better Is Coming After a While



In Detroit, one of the top gospel groups is the choir of St. James Church. Director of the choir is the Rev. Charles Nicks, who has dedicated his entire life to gospel music.

By Bob Matthews

Gospel music is essentially happy music, even though it might start out with trouble or problems, it always comes back to carry out the theme: "There is something better coming after a while."

This is the way the Rev. Charles Nicks sees it, and he has been actively involved with gospel music since early childhood, and presently directs the 125-voice choir of St. James Baptist Church in Detroit, Mich.

He is also pastor of the church which boasts a membership of over 2,500 persons. In addition to the adult choir, there is the Allegro Young Adult Choir, for those aged 18-25, also a senior choir, and a young folks junior choir.

According to Rev. Nicks, gospel music is closely related with religious beliefs. A person more knowledgeable about the word of God or in the Bible, will naturally understand more of the lyrics of gospel music.

Soul Music

Anthems and hymns are more liturgical, and connected with exact scriptural quotes, but gospel music is called more of a soul music type, and usually express how you personally feel about certain situations.

The word "soul" has come to be a synonym for black, and the impression is that gospel music is black music. Since there is a so-called gospel music surge among white singers, should they be considered true gospel singers?

Rev. Nicks had a ready answer: "White gospel is on the move too, but most of it emulates what black folks have been doing naturally all their lives."

Although he is based in Detroit, the Rev. Nicks was born in Lincoln, Nebraska, and came to Detroit when he was about 8 or 9 years old. His father was a Baptist minister, the Rev. Charles Nicks, Sr., and was called to a church in suburban Detroit, Mich.

Church Circles

His mother, Mrs. Alease Nicks, is a musician, and always played for his father and directed the choirs at his churches. Rev. Nicks grew up in church circles, and was given music lessons by his mother.

Later he was to attend Wayne University, the University of Detroit, and the Detroit Institute of Musical Art, with classical music the basic field of study.

When queried about who he considered the top stars in the gospel field, Rev. Nicks unequivocably named the Rev. James Cleveland as Number One.

He then pointed to Shirley Caesar, Walter Hawkins, Edwin Hawkins, Andrae Crouch, Sally Martin and Thomas Dorsey, Lawrence Roberts and the Angelic Choir of Nutley, N.J., Donald Vale of the Donald Vale Choraliers, Mattie Moss Clark and many others.

Quickly, he pointed out that Thomas Dorsey is best known as the author of the song, "Precious Lord."

The Rev. Nicks points to some of the songs he has written, including: "He's So Real In My Soul Today," and "These Are the Times," and "Something About God's Grace."

Those songs have been recorded by the St. James Choir, but one of the great events with which Rev. Nicks is associated has never been recorded.

Baptist Convention

Once a year, the State Baptist Convention meets, usually in Detroit Choirs from all over the state are pooled, and Cobo Hall, the local civic center, is hired to hold this immense throng.

Usually, there are 1,000 voices joined together in song, directed by Rev. Nicks, and the choir has been known to contain as many as 1,700 people.

When asked if the concerts were ever recorded, Rev. Nicks slowly shook his head and said: "Well, no they weren't. The sessions were connected with the convention, and it involved an amazing amount of red tape to see about recording the choir.

"They really should have been recorded, because they were just great, and anytime you can get a thousand folks doing anything together — it should be preserved."

Make A Living

Gospel music is changing, basically because people are discovering that you can make a living at it now. Once upon a time, people would hug, kiss and shout with gospel singers, then forget it — there was just no money involved.

In essence, gospel music shares the same experience that jazz music did a half - century ago.

Both come from deep within. Rev. Nicks says: "You can't just sit down and put on paper the feeling that makes gospel music, gospel music. That's something

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Old 'Doc Watts'

Doc Watts is a very old example — and a prime example, of the type of gospel heritage that should be preserved.

Doc Watts dates back to the beginning of the Negro spiritual. It was started many years ago by Dr. Isaac Watts, a composer of gospel music.

Rev. Cleveland explained that Dr. Watts didn't really write hymns but refrains.

He describes the method like this: "One person would stand up in the church and sing a line of music — it was a gospel message. Others would join in singing the same line with feeling."

Cleveland said, "You know we didn't have instruments in the churches back then, so everyone was singing a capella. We made our own rhythm. People would sing the only line over and over according to the way they felt it. This would go on for sometimes more than an hour."

The "Doc Watts" method is still practiced on a regular basis in many Baptist churches — but is seen more in churches down South.