FEATURE STORY

Gospel MUSIC

THE ROUTES OF GOSPEL

"HOW WE GOT OVER"

BY PEARL WILLIAMS JONES

In 1963 more than 200,000 people gathered at the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in the Nation's capital to hear the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.'s memorable and historic sermon-speech, "I Have A Dream." The measured cadence of King's delivery was punctuated by the rhythmic response of a vast congregation-like crowd. Their shouts of "Amen," "Go 'head," "Tell It," were spontaneous expressions of approval of King's stirring message. It was a community response to his commanding rhetoric. There was similar response to Mahalia Jackson, America's great gospel singer, who moved the crowd to a high spiritual tide with a soaring-sanctified performance of "How I Got Over." This gospel song written several decades earlier by the venerable gospel preacher and songwriter, W. Herbert Brewster of Memphis, Tenn., voiced the sentiment of the afternoon:

How I got over, How I got over,
My soul looks back and wonders,
How I got over.

On that afternoon, there would have been no other song (with the exception of the Civil Rights anthem, "We Shall Overcome") which so clearly expressed the heart-felt sentiments and black cultural sensibilities of that gathering. Mahalia's song and King's sermon expressed, in an eloquent way, an experience that most had shared back home in their community. Here was a song and sermon which were a vital part of the marcher's religious heritage and culture. It had been a long symbolic journey from the plantation "praise house" where shouting and singing, preaching and praying had special meaning for slave worshippers. The southern plantation was the birthplace of spirituals — those early folk songs that were made up from the prayers, praise, and preaching.

Following the end of slavery, traditional spirituals were infrequently heard except as they were transformed into concert spirituals and became a part of the repertoire of college choirs, such as those of Fisk, Tuskegee, Hampton and others. Black American concert singers would often include Europeanized versions or adaptations of the spirituals in their recitals. Marian Anderson, Paul Robeson, Roland Hayes, and others retained some of the flavor and fervor of the powerful spiritual, even in its transformed state. To some extent, improvisation of existing white protestant hymns became another source of the spirituals. The melodies, rhythms, and the vocal timbre of black singing voices altered many well-known hymns such as, "Father, I Stretch My Hand To Thee," "Amazing Grace," and others, into "spiritualized hymns of improvisation." At the turn of this century the Black American preacher and hymnodist, Charles Albert Tindley of Philadelphia, writer of "Beams Of heaven," "I'll Overcome," "Stand By Me," "Leave it There," penned some of America's most moving and influential gospel hymns. These songs preserved the fervor of the spiritual and offered improvisational possibilities which are central to the performance of Black music.

The rapidly spreading organization of male quartets contributed to a growing awareness of gospel songs. These groups often included Tindley songs in popular quartet arrangement, thus varying their repertoire of jubilee songs. The quartets represent some of the earliest recorded gospel singing to become known to the public. The Golden Gate Quartet not only recorded but was heard on national radio in the 1930s. Quartets proliferated and were profitable commercially for record companies, promoters, and churches which permitted quartet singing. Tindley hymns, quartet singing, and the congregational singing of Pentecostal and Holiness churches became the catalyst for the new gospel era.

Gospel music and spirituals developed out of the same roots: over two hundred years of Black sacred song. But these two musics differ in significant ways. Although the terms are often used interchangeably, the older spirituals bear the distinct imprint of their slave origin. They are simple folksongs, anonymously created, Biblically-inspired lyrics expressing hope for freedom. They were performed a cappella with the simple call-response of African song patterns. The ring shout, hand clapping, and foot patting served as the accompanying feature of the singing. The melodies were not complex; simply harmonized informally, as the spirit moved. Today's gospel music, on the other hand, came into being nearly sixty years ago as the result of urban influences upon the lifestyle of Black people who left the south, its customs, and memories of a harsh life. The spirituals were among the grim reminders of the slave past; therefore, a new music was born which expressed the new freedom, salvation of body and spirit, and new experiences.

Gospel music filled the need for urban religious worshippers in the cities. The more formal liturgical music of Euro-American denominations was equally as unsuitable as the older slave spirituals. Anthems, hymns, Catholic plainsong, and psalm singing were not a major factor in Black American music tradition. The contrived and lofty sentiments of English prose did not fit the humble circumstances of most Black Christians. Their sentiments were expressed in the song:

Jesus on the main line, Tell Him what you want,
Call Him up, and tell Him what you want.
If you need more power, if you want the Holy Ghost, etc.

or,

I'm a soldier, in the army of the Lord . . .
Have you tried Jesus, He's alright.

On the church music scene of the 1930s, Thomas A. Dorsey of Chicago, now an impressive eighty-eight-year-old "Father of Gospel Music," made the synthesis between the old time spiritual and the new congregational church songs. He coined his new creation "gospel song." It was also known as "evangelistic music." Gospel filled the bill for Black urban worship. Mr. Dorsey defines gospel music in its most basic terms: "good news," he says. Speaking confidently and eloquently in the recent gospel film documentary, "Say Amen, Somebody," Dorsey states:

Down through the ages gospel meant, What?
(What do they say?) Good news? You mean
you don't know that?

And who would dispute the personality who, as much as anyone, had a hand in spreading the good news? Dorsey's gospel classics defined the perimeters of gospel composition for several decades. His "Precious Lord," Peace In the Valley," and scores of other songs helped to spread the gospel message. The singers taught by Dorsey, such as Mahalia Jackson, and his co-partner in the gospel music published business and the National Convention of Choirs and Choruses, Miss Sallie Martin, toured America in the 30s, 40s, and 50s. Willie Mae Ford Smith, Lucie Campbell, and Brewster also helped inspire Roberta Martin, James Cleveland, Albertina Walker and the Caravans, the Davis Sisters, Alex Bradford, Shirley Caesar, Inez Andrews, and Clara Ward and the Ward Singers. While the groups were travelling, singing concerts and revivals in churches and auditoriums, the gospel choir was growing in importance, stylistic development and influence. In many ways, the gospel choir is perhaps the most characteristic symbol of real gospel music. The gospel choir is the most unmistakable entity of gospel sound, perhaps because its music is always central to church service, and in many ways resembles an extension of the congregation itself. Since the 1960s, gospel singing by college choirs has become increasingly important as a medium of musical, cultural, social, and spiritual identity. College competitions and festivals flourish throughout academe.

Students in high schools also find enjoyment and opportunity for recognition through participation with gospel singing. The college gospel choir appears not to be a strictly Black campus phenomenon, but many predominantly white colleges and universities, including West Point Military Academy, have excellent gospel choirs. And there is a significant amount of serious musicianship and scholarship emerging from many of the academic institutions. It is an important development that should lead to a growing corpus of research and publication on gospel music. This much-needed knowledge should, in turn, lead to a growing awareness and deeper appreciation for one of America's most original art forms, gospel music.

In today's exciting world of religious music, it has become acceptable, even fashionable to become involved with gospel. The music of contemporary gospel artists, such as Andrae and Sandra Crouch, the Winans, Walter and Edwin Hawkins, Nicholas, Vanessa Bell Armstrong, the Clark Sisters, Keith Pringle, and the classically influenced Richard Smallwood Singers, is, indeed, very good music. Favorable comprison of these artists can be made with the finest artists in any field of music — excellence being the criteria which distinguishes good music of all types. The recognition which gospel artists should receive is long overdue. It is time for the music world to acknowledge Mattie Moss Clark, Shirley Caesar, Delois Barrett Campbell and the Barretts, along with scores of other composers, songwriters, singers, and instrumentalists who contribute to some of the world's most invigorating and challenging new music. ■

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Excerpted from the "McDonald's Salute to Gospel Music Reference Guide," by **Pearl Williams Jones.** For additional information on the Guide and other Gospel Information write to:
Customer Relation's Center, 1 McDonald's Plaza, Oak Brook, Illinois 60521

Shirley Caesar

The "McDonald's Salute to Gospel Music," kicked off in February by many McDonald's Restaurants as part of their Black History Month celebration, features a four-city tour by gospel singer Shirley Caesar. Known as the *"first lady of gospel,"* Ms. Caesar has received more Grammy Awards and nominations than any other gospel singer since Mahalia Jackson. In New York, Philadelphia, Dallas, and Houston she will be visiting schools and churches, presenting live performances and discussing the evolution of Gospel Music. Ms. Caesar also will appear across the country during the year in Gospel-Fest Concerts sponsored by local McDonald's Restaurants.