

## Chapter 36

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# Gospel in Wisconsin

### *Program 36 Performances*

1. Gill Singers, "On and On with Jesus." 2. Madison Gospelaire, "I Know I Am a Child of God." 3. Corinth Missionary Baptist Church with Joanne Moore, "You Don't Have to Move a Mountain." 4. Madison Gospelaire, "Guide Me." 5. Happy Harmonizers, "Happy with Jesus." 6. Richard Jones, "Shake My Mother's Hand" 7. Jannie Lee Burton, "Will You Pay a Price?" 8. Vocalaires, "Be Careful with Your Soul." 9. Independence Gosepettes, "Save My Soul."

### **Dr. Watts Transformed**

**A**frican-American gospel is an immensely complex phenomenon. It encompasses music, ceremony, text, and theology. Millions of churchgoers in many denominations sing gospel—for example, African Methodist Episcopal (AME), Baptist, Church of Christ (Holiness), and Pentecostal or Apostolic Faith churches. The music is absolutely central to the worship. Often the singer in an African-American church can rival the minister. "I heard somebody say the minister's the man because nobody ever got saved off singing," says a disgruntled Roberta Martin Singer. "That's not so, singing has saved *many* souls" (Heilbut 1985).

Music has been integral to the Christian religion of African Americans since slavery. In the 1700s slaves attended and were influenced by the revival meetings of the Great Awakening, set in motion by firebrand preachers like Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards. The slaves combined eighteenth-century English revival hymns with African stylistic preferences to create the form of lead-and-response congregational singing usually called "Dr. Watts singing." The style is named for Isaac Watts, a composer of stern Calvinist hymns, born in Southampton, England, in 1674, who along with John Wesley, William C. Doane, and John Newton was a noted hymn writer. His *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, first published in 1707, has been so influential that even his colleague John Newton's best-known composition, "Amazing Grace," often may be called a "Dr. Watts hymn" by African Americans (Spencer 1990).

In the Dr. Watts style, as in Anglo-Celtic southern white church singing, a minister or song leader "lines it out," that is, chants a line which the whole congregation then repeats in a slow free meter. The slow tempo and straightforward melody allows each singer to extensively improvise embellishments and riffs that parallel the vocal techniques of secular field hollers and work songs. Typically there is no instrumental accompaniment. The oppression and uncertainty African Americans have faced found a voice in the melancholy tone and resonance of such stark Watts lyrics as "... death may soon disrobe us all/Of what we now possess" (from "The Day Is Past and Gone").

The venerable Dr. Watts style still persists in some rural southern churches as well as in the urban communities of former ruralites. However, a succession of newer musical and song styles have swept African-American churches. In the late nineteenth century, upbeat hymns without lining out, like "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" and "Pass Me Not, O Gentle Savior," offered a more optimistic sound and theological vision in congregational singing. Small groups also emerged in the "quartet" style, performing either *a cappella* or with a nonintrusive rhythmic backup.

## Quartets and Conventions

The term *quartet* refers to the four-part harmony a group of singers employs, although the group may feature five, six, and occasionally even ten singers. Traveler's accounts mention slaves singing in "quartettes" as early as 1851, and Reconstruction-era traveling minstrel shows began to feature secular black quartets. Reminiscing about his 1890s Florida childhood, noted musician and scholar James Weldon Johnson stated, "Pick up four colored . . . young men anywhere and the chances are . . . that you have a quartet. Let one of them sing the melody and the others will naturally find the parts" (Johnson 1929).

As Johnson noted, quartet singing, sacred and secular, has long been a widespread and popular tradition among African-American men. Like the preacher's and deacon's roles, quartets used to be an exclusively male province. Female quartets are a more recent phenomenon, and women quartets still tend to call their highest singers "tenors" and the lowest "bassos."

Quartets managed to find a foothold in popular culture quite early. Columbia recorded the Standard Quartette on cylinder in 1895. In 1902 the Victor catalog listed "Negro Shouts by [the] Dinwiddie Colored Quartet . . . sung as only negroes can sing them" (Broughton 1985). The industry took until the 1920s to begin recording African-American folk music—blues, jazz, sermons, and quartets—more extensively. By the later 1920s gospel quartets were being broadcast "live" along with hillbilly musicians, dance bands, and comedians on southern radio.

Tidewater area groups like the Silver Leaf Quartet and the Norfolk Jubilee Singers of Virginia were among the pioneers, and by the 1930s the Soul Stirrers from Texas and the Famous Blue Jay Singers from Alabama were gaining full-time professional status. But the group to have the most influential popular career in the 1930s and 1940s was the Golden Gate Quartet of Norfolk, Virginia. They developed a rhythmic, infectious style described by Willie Johnson, founder of the group, as "vocal percussion." Using polyrhythmic, syncopated vocal backup, they popularized the biblical fables of the jubilee songs. Many quartets later emulated their exciting practice of switching lead voices during a song. Their career included regular broadcasts on the NBC radio network and performances at the White House and New York's Cafe Society.

The quartet tradition has continued to proliferate and evolve, as influential groups like the Swan Silvertones, the Dixie Hummingbirds, and the Highway QC's emerged in the postwar era. Perhaps Take 6, whose jazzy harmonies truly stretch the boundaries of quartet singing, may become the Golden Gate Quartet of the 1990s, crossing over to a broad popular audience.

Although nowadays people frequently refer to all the above-mentioned styles of religious singing as "gospel," many older singers reserve the term for only the style created by Thomas A. Dorsey, who coined the term *gospel*. Born in 1899, the son of a Baptist minister, Dorsey was raised in Atlanta. In his teens and twenties he was a blues pianist. As "Georgia Tom" he accompanied blues greats Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith. In 1921 he was "saved" but continued to divide his



*The Happy Harmonizers (L–R: Ardella Herron, Geneva Herron, Shirley Herron, Bertha McMillan), Milwaukee, early 1980s Wisconsin Folk Museum Collection*

attention between blues and religious music until 1929 when he devoted himself totally to gospel.

Profoundly influenced by the songs of C. A. Tindley, a Philadelphia Methodist minister, Dorsey was especially prolific in the 1930s. During the Depression he combined the good news of gospel with the melodies and rhythms of blues. Through sales of his sheet music, his annual National Gospel Singers Convention, first held in 1932, and his ceaseless touring from 1932 to 1944, Dorsey imbued African-American churches with his gospel sound and created the music which made possible the solo careers of the singers he trained, like Sallie Martin, Willie Mae Ford Smith, Roberta Martin, and Mahalia Jackson. His classic song, "Precious Lord," composed while grieving the deaths of his wife and child in 1932, is one of the most powerful and best-loved gospel numbers and a showpiece for the noted gospel stylists. Another Dorsey song, "Peace in the Valley," is best known from the recordings of Red Foley and Elvis Presley.

Dorsey's Gospel Convention has served as the model for gospel workshops now held around the country. The most notable recently was James Cleveland's annual Gospel Music Workshop of America. Local chapters make sure gospel continues to grow and prosper as young singers and musicians learn to perform in choirs as soloists, choir directors, or instrumentalists.

Although Wisconsin is on the northern periphery of the gospel heartland, the gospel heard in the Dairyland is a part of an influential and growing nationwide tradition. From a *cappella* quartets like the Happy Harmonizers to contemporary stylists like the Vocalaires, Wisconsin groups perform the various styles of gospel at musical gatherings throughout the Midwest—and even beyond.