

AN INTRODUCTION TO GOSPEL SONG

Compiled and Edited by Samuel B. Charters

RBF RECORDS RF 5



Music 170G

M
2198
I62
1962

MUSIC LP

SIDE I
 Band 1: ROLL JORDAN ROLL
 Fisk University Jubilee Quartet (c. 1913)
 Band 2: I'VE BEEN 'BUKED AND I'VE BEEN SCORNED
 MOST DONE TRAVELING
 Tuskegee Institute Singers (c. 1917)
 Band 3: LEAVE IT THERE
 Pace Jubilee Singers with Hattie Parker (1927)
 Band 4: YOU MOTHER HEART BREAKERS
 Rev. J. M. Gates and Congregation (1929)
 Band 5: WHY DON'T YOU LIVE SO GOD CAN USE YOU?
 Rev. J. M. Gates and Congregation (1929)
 Band 6: I LOOKED DOWN THE LINE AND I WONDERED
 Rev. F. W. McGee and Congregation—with
 triangle, trombone and piano (c. 1929)
 Band 7: JESUS, THE LORD IS A SAVIOUR
 Rev. F. W. McGee and Congregation—with
 triangle, trombone and piano (c. 1929)

SIDE II
 Band 1: DID I WONDER
 Sieter Ernestine Washington with Bunk Johnson's
 Jazz Band (c. 1946)
 Band 2: I AM SO HAPPY (Parts I and II)
 Elder Lightfoot Solomon Michaux and his "Happy Am"
 Choir and Orchestra (c. 1945)
 Band 3: I GOT TWO WINGS
 Rev. Utah Smith and Congregation, with electrified
 guitar (1951)
 Band 4: PSALM FOR CONFUSION
 Mother McCleave and her sons (1953)
 Band 5: WHEN MOTHERS GONE
 The Spirit of Memphis, with trombone and bass drum
 Band 6: HE'S A FRIEND OF MINE
 The Spirit of Memphis (c. 1954)

©1972 RBF RECORDS, 17 W. 60th STREET, NYC, USA
 AN INTRODUCTION TO GOSPEL SONG

RBF RECORDS RF 5

COVER PHOTO: Fisk University Jubilee Quartet
 COVER DESIGN BY RONALD CLYNE

AN INTRODUCTION TO GOSPEL SONG

Compiled and Edited by Samuel B. Charters

SIDE ONE

Band 1: ROLL JORDAN ROLL
Fisk University Jubilee Quartet (c. 1913)

Band 2: I'VE BEEN BUKED AND I'VE BEEN SCORNE and
MOST DONE TRAVELLING
Tuskegee Institute Singers (c. 1917)

Band 3: LEAVE IT THERE
Pace Jubilee Singers with Hattie Parker
(1927)

Band 4: YOU MOTHER HEART BREAKERS
Rev. J. M. Gates and Congregation (1929)

Band 5: JESUS ROSE FROM THE DEAD
Rev. J. M. Gates and Congregation (1929)

Band 6: I LOOKED DOWN THE LINE AND I WONDERED
Rev. F. W. McGee and Congregation - with
triangle, trombone and piano (c. 1929)

Band 7: JESUS THE LORD IS A SAVIOUR
Rev. F. W. McGee and Congregation - with
triangle, trombone and piano (c. 1929)

SIDE TWO

Band 1: DID I WONDER
Sister Ernestine Washington with Bunk
Johnson's Jazz Band (c. 1946)

Band 2: I AM SO HAPPY - Parts I and II
Elder Lightfoot Solomon Michaux, and his
"Happy Am I" Choir and Orchestra (c. 1945)

Band 3: I GOT TWO WINGS
Rev. Utah Smith and Congregation, with
electrified guitar. (1951)

Band 4: PSALM FOR CONFUSION
Mother McCleave and her sons (1953)

Band 5: WHEN MOTHER'S GONE
The Spirit of Memphis, with trombone and
bass drum (c. 1954)

Band 6: HE'S A FRIEND OF MINE
The Spirit of Memphis (c. 1954)

Samuel B. Charters

On October 6, 1871 a small group of Negro students left Nashville, Tennessee, traveling by train to Cincinnati, Ohio. With them were their school treasurer, Mr. George L. White, and a woman named Wells, the principal of a missionary school in Athens, Alabama, to take care of the women students. There were eleven students in the group, six young women, and five young men. They were poorly dressed, with little more money than their fare to Cincinnati, and they were almost desperate. Their school needed money if it was to continue its operations, to send them even as far as Cincinnati had taken nearly the entire school treasury, leaving money enough for only a few days provisions; and White had given what money he had, borrowing what he could with his property as security. They were traveling in the hope that they might be allowed to sing in churches in the northern states, and that ministers who were interested in missionary work would help them to take up collections at the end of their performance. White was without musical training, but he had found his students so musical that his little choir had already been favorably mentioned in the Nashville papers. They were to be gone, instead of a few months, for three years, on a trip that was to take them not only through much of the United States, but to Europe and Great Britain, that was to lead them before the President of the United States and before the British royal family. Mr. White and his choir earned the money that their school needed, giving to Fisk University the funds to expand their facilities and teaching program, and even more than this the Fisk Jubilee Singers, singing before audiences for whom the Civil War was still a reality, showed that newly freed Negro could take his place in American society.

Religious music, from the spiritual to the most excited gospel shout, has always been an important element in the life of the Negro in America. During the years of slavery it helped to lighten the burden of oppression, with its emphasis on the life to which the slave might escape at death. In the years since Emancipation the music has held its place as an expression of religious faith and attitude. Among the evangelical sects, both white and Negro, music has been used for many years to stir the emotions, to bring about the intense moment of identification with the Christian "spirit" which is the ideal of much of the worship, and to give some expression to the almost incoherent excitement of the church meeting. As the religion changes to a more restrained worship the music changes, with choirs replacing the congregational singing, and soloists performing hymns rather than the improvised exhortations of the evangelical service, but music continues to hold its place in the church.

The music that the little group of Fisk Jubilee singers performed on their first tour in the 1870's would be largely out of place in services today. They sang sentimental songs, among them Stephen Foster compositions, as well as their spirituals, and the spirituals had been arranged until much of their original character had been lost, but their music still stirred a wide interest. It was to provide the first interest in gospel song, and lead finally to a more general appreciation of the entire range of Negro song and music. Some elements of the "call and response" of much early nineteenth century religious music was retained, but the antiphonal response was generally harmonized with simple chords. In the occasional syncopations and rhythmic subtlety there was a suggestion of some of the excitement of the shouted evangelical service, but this

was limited to sections of songs or to brief interjections. For the singers themselves the music probably represented a serious emotional problem; since the music which was more representative of the Negro expression did not entirely reflect their own aspirations toward a social position more fully integrated into the larger American society. They felt that their arranged spirituals were a refinement of the less sophisticated music and, more important, that their music would finally win for the Negro in America a higher place than would the more urgent, but less comprehensible music of the evangelical church service. Their music should be considered in the light of the social as well as musical ideals.

The recording companies were early interested in the singing groups from not only Fisk University, but from the other schools, among them Tuskegee and Hampton, which had followed Fisk's lead. There are many early recordings of this music, and although there is a disappointing restraint to many of the performances there are often moments which are touching in the earnest simplicity. The recording of "Roll, Jordan, Roll", done by the Fisk Jubilee Quartet about 1913, (Side 1, Band 1.), is particularly moving in its suggestion of the Afro-American pentatonic scale in the second unison phrase, ". . . I want to go to heaven when I die. . ." "I've Been 'Buked and I've Been Scorned" and "Most Done Travelin'", recorded by the Tuskegee Institute Singers about 1916 (Side 1, Band 2), is interesting in its tentative use of harmonies which are less closely related to standard European practice. The movement of the voices is parallel, rather than contrary, the bass reaching a resolution on tonic without the usual regard for the movement of the treble. It was this style of singing, with an increased emphasis on rhythmic interest, which became the "gospel quartet" of the 1930's and 1940's. The singing of Hattie Parker, soloist with the Pace Jubilee Singers on their 1927 recording of "Leave It There" (Side 1, Band 3) shows already a greater expressiveness in her use of rhythm and vocal phrase, and represents the fullest use of the materials of the more Negro tradition while retaining the quality of the trained choir group. Singers like Hattie Parker are an interesting anticipation of successful contemporary performers like Mahalia Jackson.

In the 1920's, when for the first time there was recording done for an emerging Negro audience, there was as much interest in religious singing as there was in secular song styles like the blues. Among the first men to be recorded was the Atlanta minister J.M. Gates, who became very successful with his recordings of sermons and simple hymns. As many copies of Gates recordings are found in southern junk shops as copies of Bessie Smith records, and like Bessie's blues records they usually have been subjected to hard playing. The performances have a ferocious sincerity to them, an almost tearing emotional quality. Gates remains, despite the thirty years of "field" recording that have passed since his finest performances, the best representative of the music that was typical of the rural religious service. Many singers who have become well known for their performances on Library of Congress collections or in later field collections show a clear influence from Gates' recordings. He was as successful with his sermons as he was with his hymns, and there are few contemporary recordings of sermons which are without some Gates influence. Many of his sermons were meant to be topical, and he often put together conventional phrases without more than a momentary interest, among them things like "Tiger Flower's Last Fight", "God's Wrath In The St. Louis Cyclone" or "Hitler And Hell", but he could be disturbing in the vividness of his imagery. His "You Mother Heart Breakers", recorded in 1929

(Side 1, Band 4), is one of his most effective sermons, with its insistence that ". . . your mother is the only one who can tell you who is your father. And she's the only one that knows." The singing with his small "congregation" is clearly related to the hymnology of the white protestant sects. The assisting singers in "Jesus Rose From the Dead" (Side 1, Band 5) have a strongly conventional approach to the harmonic cadence, and although the song shows its origin in its harmonic, rather than antiphonal structure, the performance shows a vivid overlay of Afro-American elements. The vocal tone is the hard, closed tone of the rural singer, rather than the open tone of groups like the Tuskegee or Fisk singers, the rhythm has become a complex phrasing of rich suggestion and power, and Gates intersperses the verses with chanted elements of sermon. It is difficult to tell whether Gates was entirely serious in many of his sermons, and the singing sometimes is repetitive and dull, but he remains one of the most important figures in the history of recorded gospel song.

Although instrumental groups no longer are used in much protestant worship the Negro Holiness groups have continued to use instruments of every kind in the church. Occasionally recording directors took advantage of this freedom, and in the late 1920's there was some recording of church groups with professional musicians added to the congregation. The results may have been "irreligious" as some Negro church groups contended, but the music was often overwhelming. The Folkways collection "American Folk Music" FA 2952 includes two of these congregation-jazz band performances, "Fifty Miles of Elbow Room" by Rev. F. W. McGee, and "I'm On The Battlefield For My Lord" by Rev. Rice, with a band thought to be led by the New Orleans trumpet player Punch Miller. Sometimes the churches had orchestras made up of their own members, and Rev. McGee's "I Looked Down The Line And I Wondered", (Side 1, Band 6) and "Jesus The Lord Is A Saviour" (Side 1, Band 7), have an "orchestra" of piano, trombone, and triangle that is so rough-hewn that it must be made up of amateur musicians. These recordings were done about 1929, when McGee was leading a congregation in Detroit.

The relationship between jazz and religious song is still strong, and there were recordings during the 1940's that joined the two styles. Moses Asch recorded Sister Ernestine Washington with Bunk Johnson's jazz band in New York in the mid '40's, and their performance of "Did I Wonder" (Side 2, Band 1) has the same enthusiasm that marked the McGee congregations. Probably the most overwhelming use of instruments and congregation together, however, was in the recordings of Elder Solomon Lightfoot Michaux and his "Happy Am I" Choir and Orchestra. Michaux was one of the first Negro evangelists to broadcast, and as early as 1934 he was broadcasting a morning program from New York that had a wide following. His style derives from the old polyphonic shape note hymns, but to the imitation of melodic line in the polyphony he has added a rushing beat, giving the music roaring excitement. In his early recordings the polyphonic style is more clearly developed, in this recording, done about 1945, "I Am So Happy" Parts I and II, (Side 2, Band 2), the rhythm is predominant, but Michaux still dominates the ensemble with his strong voice and determined exhortation. The instrumental groups in the church are no longer so colorful, but the electric guitar is still very popular. "I Got Two Wings", (Side 2, Band 3) recorded by Reverend Utah Smith and Congregation in New Orleans about

1948, uses Smith's voice and guitar against a rough shouted accompaniment that includes some virtuoso hand clapping.

Gospel song today still includes all the elements that were present in the music in earlier periods, but there have been many changes in presentation. A sermon, like that of Mother McCleave, "Psalm For Confusion", (Side 2, Band 4), is more consciously artistic than the sermons of Rev. Gates, although there is still the sincere expressiveness. A slow, "surge" song, like "When Mother's Gone", by The Spirit of Memphis, (Side 2, Band 5), uses a bass drum, a trombone, and a soft chorus accompaniment to give an added drama to the solo voice. The performance is a remarkable technical achievement, with the solo singer using every device of melisma to heighten the effect. A performance by the entire group, "He's A Friend of Mine" (Side 2, Band 6) uses the elements of antiphonal response, but the response is a rhythmic emphasis, the solo voice almost used as an instrumental contrast in its rough shout, and the rhythmic impetus dominates the singing. In performances like these there is still the heart of the music that the Fisk Jubilee Singers brought to audiences in Europe and the United States. Despite the changes and developments in style the music still has the emotional concern and sincere religiosity.

The changing styles in gospel music are in themselves an indication of the genuineness of the religious expression in the American Negro community. As the styles of popular music have changed the styles of religious music have changed with them. When religious faith is still a serious concern it reflects the life around it with a remarkable lack of self-consciousness. The contrast between the religious music of the Negro community, with its strong interrelationship with the styles of popular music, and the music of the urban community, with its "Old-Time" sentimental hymns, reflects, with considerable accuracy the seriousness of religion in much of Negro life, and its decline to meaningless declarations of faith - usually a "faith of our fathers" - in the larger community. As long as the religious faith remains a sincere emotional experience the religious song, "gospel" song, will retain its excitement and its strength.