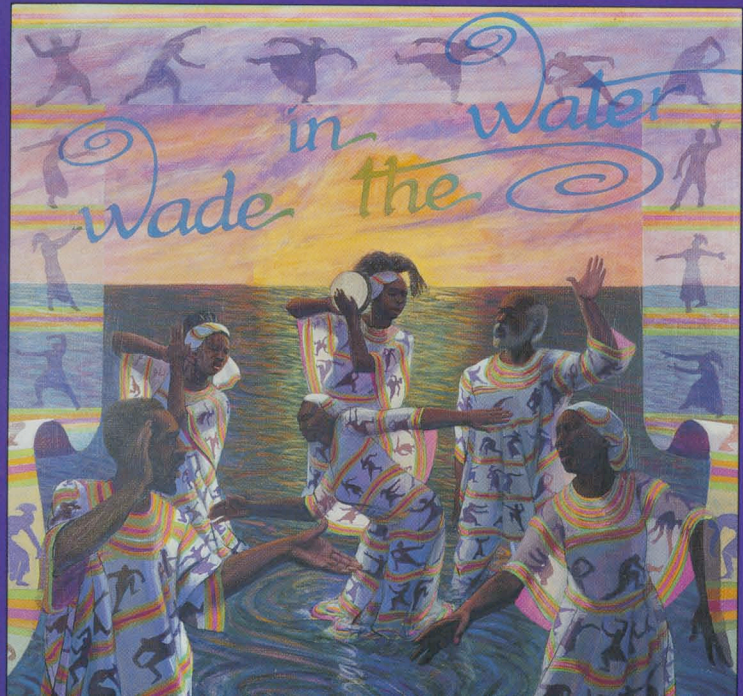




AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY GOSPEL



Wade in the Water series compiler,
Bernice Johnson Reagon, sings on
this recording Volume 4, *African
American Community Gospel*, and
on Volume 3, *African American
Gospel: The Pioneering Composers*.
Photo courtesy the Smithsonian Institution



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Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings
Center for Folklife Programs & Cultural Studies
955 L'Enfant Plaza, Suite 2600
Smithsonian Institution
Washington DC 20560

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AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY GOSPEL

*Conceived and compiled by Bernice Johnson Reagon
Annotated by Bernice Johnson Reagon and Lisa Pertillar Brevard
Recorded 1992-1993, produced in collaboration with National Public Radio*

1. Jesus Is on the Mainline **The Gospel Harmonettes** 5:15
2. Ye That Is without Sin, Cast the First Stone **Brother John Hale** 2:33
3. Nobody Knows the Trouble I See **The Poole Brothers** 3:38
4. A Charge to Keep I Have **The Poole Brothers** 4:13
5. There'll Be Singing Over Yonder **The Century Gospel Singers** 1:23
6. Near, My God, to Thee **Four Eagles Quartet** 3:19
7. Put Your Trust in Jesus **The Angelic Harmonizers** 4:28
8. Who'll Be a Witness (For My Lord) ? **The Golden Gates Quartet** 4:49
9. Lead Me, Guide Me **The Rev. Donald Vails and the Celebration Delegation** 4:02
10. God Is So Good to Me **The Rev. Donald Vails and the Celebration Delegation** 6:12
11. Couldn't Hear Nobody Pray **Bernice Johnson Reagon** 1:46
12. Peace in the Valley **The Henry Davis Singers** 5:02
13. Hold to God's Unchanging Hand **The Union Temple Baptist Church** 7:04
14. Let All the People Praise Him **The Saint Augustine Catholic Church**
Gospel Choir 4:06
15. Yes, Lord (Church of God in Christ chant) **The Bible Way Temple**
Radio Choir 0:59

As we near the end of the twentieth century, African American sacred music remains a vital part of community expression. Featured here are sacred music performances from Alabama and Washington, D.C., presenting the music from local perspectives.



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(Charles Wesley) Poole Brothers 4:13
5. **There'll Be Singing over Yonder**
Century Gospel Singers 1:23
6. **Nearer, My God, to Thee**
(Arranged by the Soul Stirrers)
Four Eagles Quartet 3:19
7. **Put Your Trust in Jesus**
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5:02
13. **Hold To God's Unchanging Hand**
(Jennie Wilson/F.L. Eiland, Stamps
Baxter Publishing, BMI)
Union Temple Baptist Church 7:04
14. **Let All the People Praise Him**
(C.H. Morris) St. Augustine Catholic
Church Gospel Choir 4:06
15. **Yes, Lord (Church of God in
Christ chant)**
(Bishop Charles Mason) Bible Way
Temple Radio Choir 0:59

INTRODUCTION

by Bernice Johnson Reagon and Lisa Pertillar Brevard

An important principle drawn from African culture is the indispensability of music for worship; thus the Black community gives high priority to fill this important need. Practitioners of African religions believe that the spirit will not descend without song. In the plantation praise house, spirituals were as necessary to worship as gospel song is to contemporary Black urban worship.

Pearl Williams-Jones (1981)

As we near the end of the twentieth century, African American sacred music continues to be most vital as a community-based expression. It is created in contemporary worship services and other environ-

ments by people who need the songs and singing as spiritual and social nurturing in their everyday lives. This recording presents selected examples of sacred music performances from two different regions of the United States of America — Alabama and the nation's capital, Washington D.C. — to present the music from a local perspective.

On December 12th and 13th, 1993, the 18th anniversary celebration of the Gospel Harmonettes of Demopolis, Alabama, ninety miles outside of Birmingham, presents a regional view of community sacred music carried on within a strong quartet anniversary tradition. The music heard over two days from more than forty groups, choirs,

and soloists covered a wide range, from the oldest styles surviving in small worship communities to new arrangements of old songs, to national favorites (songs familiar to gospel audiences anywhere in the United States), to new compositions.

In community gospel music, what African Americans have woven into the very fabric of their community lives includes more than the successful commercial singing available throughout the world through concert performances, radio, television, and recordings. The same people who are the constituency for the "hottest" (most popular) national professional gospel artists are themselves involved in bringing richness into their lives and the lives of their churches and communities by forming their own small singing ensembles and choirs, and devoting a great deal of time to the

creation of their own music. In most instances, top ranking professional gospel choirs begin as community groups making music for local audiences.

Tracks 1-8

The first selections are from the 18th anniversary celebration of the Gospel Harmonettes of Demopolis, Alabama. During two days, more than forty groups, choirs, and soloists participated in celebrating the work and music of this unique *a cappella* female group, who formed more than eighteen years ago to sing their own arrangements of spirituals and congregational songs.

Such Alabama quartet anniversary celebrations are community events in which a given group's anniversary is celebrated by receiving performances from other groups in a region that can extend as much as 200 miles. Upon arrival,

the visiting performers register with a nominal financial offering and are then listed on the program for an A and B selection. This system provides a wide-ranging performance program for the community as well as some financial benefit to the host group that is celebrating its anniversary.

The Alabama anniversary tradition provides rich opportunities for local groups to be heard and for them to hear other groups in their region. When singers perform at your anniversary, it obligates you to come to their anniversary programs when they are announced. Often 80 to 90 percent of a group's entire performance schedule is made up of anniversary performances. While this self-supporting system is very important for local groups, performers with wider constituencies sometimes find themselves burdened by such demands. Then they tend to appear as special

guests on the program. This was the status of the Golden Gate Quartet from Starkville, Mississippi, and the Four Eagles Quartet from Bessemer, Alabama. But if you are a community group who needs to sing, this innovative community system can provide weekly opportunities.

Most of the groups performing in this quartet anniversary are independent music organizations, with only a few choirs being church-affiliated. The Demopolis anniversary provided an excellent example of some of the oldest quartet styles (a cappella and accompanied) that still survive in the historically rich Alabama quartet tradition. Included among the selections (track 2) is one of the last recordings made by retired veteran quartet singer, the late Brother John Hale, who sang for 56 years as a member of the Five Kings of Harmony. The 57-year-old quartet, the Four Eagles of

Bessemer, Alabama, are only one of several present who, through their long service as quartet singers, continue to sustain the gospel quartet tradition of Jefferson County, Alabama, the place where this tradition is thought to have evolved from the jubilee quartet style.

Speaking of the purpose behind the community quartet tradition, John Griffin, of Birmingham, Alabama's Gospel Southernaires stated, "We were serving God. We wanted to live, look, and sing so that somebody would want to take a pattern after us."

Joe Watson, leader of Bessemer's Four Eagles, remembered first coming into the group: "When I met the group, they were rehearsing once a week. So they had their own rules and regulations set up.... They had certain rules that you had to be to practice on time, and you couldn't do no drinking, and you had to lead a clean life....And

the group was always based on that — a clean-cut person being in the group."

The repertoires of these community groups have a wide range. They include songs that became national hits, like the performance of "Nearer My God to Thee," by the Four Eagles Quartet, in an arrangement created by the Soul Stirrers of Chicago, led by the legendary Sam Cooke. On the other hand, during the same anniversary weekend we documented the Century Gospel Singers who reached back into a country harmony sound for their performance of "There'll Be Singing over Yonder." The Golden Gates from Starksville, Mississippi, are a leading regional headliner group working Mississippi and Alabama in community programs with a more contemporary style and repertoire. The Gates' songs are often their own arrangements that have become regional

favorites, while their sound is well within the modern quartet style of the 1960s and 1970s.

Tracks 9-15

The second half of our program includes performances from the African American sacred music community in our nation's capital, Washington, D.C. Most of these performances are strongly connected with worship services within this rich urban gospel community. Among these selections are performances in the classic gospel style performed by Donald Vails and the Celebration Delegation, a contemporary rendering of Thomas Andrew Dorsey's composition, "Peace In The Valley," by the Henry Davis Singers, and the spirited processional praise shout song created by Leon Roberts for his "Gospel Mass" at the St. Augustine Catholic Church.

Lena McLin, composer and niece of the "Father of Gospel Music" Thomas Andrew Dorsey, put it succinctly when she stated: "Music for Black people is the sum-total of their life experiences. It is everything that we are. It is the predictable future. It is definitely the singable past; and it is the present 'I Am.'... Every generation will say what it has to say in its own way, but they will speak!" (From an interview with Bernice Johnson Reagon, Chicago, Illinois, October 1992.) In African American communities, gospel music remains a way of developing and asserting a sense of individual and group identity, of finding one's own individual and collective voice in one's own time, and speaking through one's heart and soul for all to hear.

The Songs

1. Jesus Is on the Mainline (Tell Him What You Want)

Gospel Harmonettes

The Gospel Harmonettes's "Jesus Is on the Mainline," performed during their 18th anniversary concert in December, 1992, in Demopolis, Alabama, retains a 1960s "female group" singing style in close harmony. Their repertoire basically consists of their own arrangements of spirituals and traditional gospel songs. Their harmonic style is marked by the two top harmony lines above the melody, and its structure characteristically underscores and amplifies the lead singer's testimony. In their performance of "Jesus Is on the Mainline (Tell Him What You Want)," Annie Wilkes, their intense, yet soft, unusual falsetta soprano lead delivers a brilliant

rendering of this arrangement, creating fresh poetic and musical material that includes the full range of gospel textured singing. Her voice, the highest in the group, is electrifying in live performance. Congregational verbal and hand-clap response heightens the emotional experience and performance of the song.

Oh, Jesus is on the mainline,
Tell Him what you want. [repeat 3 times]
You can call Him up and tell Him what you want.

Other lines:

If you want your soul to be saved...
If you want your body healed...

Vamp:

I Call him Jesus, my Jesus,
Call him Jesus, call doctor Jesus...
Call in the morning, my Jesus...
Call him a wheel, in a wheel...

2. Ye That without Sin, Cast the First Stone

Brother John Hale

The late Brother John Hale, the veteran quartet singer who for fifty-six years had performed with the Five Kings of Harmony of Bessemer, Alabama, performs a wonderful, gentle almost *a cappella* rendering of the Biblical scripture lesson found in St. John 8:7: "He that is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone at her." "Almost *a cappella*" is an appropriate description because, as Brother Hale starts to sing, the guitarist across the room (who is there for another group) picks up a delicate, light, rhythmic line to underscore Hale's sensitive delivery.

Lord, ye that without sin, Lord, cast
your first stone, [repeat 3 times]
Cast the first stone, if you've done
no wrong.

According to the Bible, these words are a fact,
Some men brought a woman to
Jesus.
Caught this woman in act,
Jesus put these men to a test,
They got so 'shamed of themselves
When He said, "Ye that without sin,
cast your stone."

Do you know one thing?
Jesus stooped down,
Start writing on the ground.
When He rose up, all of those men
was gone.
He says, "Woman! Where your
accusers?"
She said, "Master, yonder go."
He said, "You! Go, in peace and sin
no more."

Wait a minute, here, let me tell you
something here, children.
Listen here sisters and brothers,
I tell you what you need to do.

Do unto others as you will have do
to you.

Yes, stop gossiping on the phone,
Before you tear up somebody's
home (maybe mine!)
Ye that without sin, cast your stone.

3. Nobody Knows the Trouble I See
Poole Brothers

The Poole Brothers perform
the quartet arrangement of the
African American spiritual
“Nobody Knows the Trouble I See”
a cappella and then follow it with a
rendering of the lined hymn, “A
Charge To Keep I Have,” which
opens up the entire congregation
in “witnessing” with them with
shouts of “amen” and affirmations.

Lord, children, nobody knows the
trouble I see [repeat 3 times]
Glory hallelu.

Sometimes, sometimes I'm down,
Still my soul is heavenly-bound.
Glory hallelu.

Jordan river is chilly and cold,
It chilled my body, but it didn't
chill my soul.

When I get to heaven, gone to put
on my shoes,
I'm gonna walk around in glory
and spread the news.

4. A Charge to Keep I Have
Poole Brothers

A charge to keep I have, a God to
glorify,
Who gave His Son my soul to save,
and fitted for the sky.

To serve the present age, my calling
to fulfill,
Oh, may it all my powers engage, to
do my Master's will.

5. There'll Be Singing Over Yonder
Century Gospel Singers

The Century Gospel Singers of
Thomasville, Alabama, perform a
warm, clear, country church har-
mony in their handclapping *a cap-
pella* rendition of “There'll Be
Singing Over There.”

There'll be singing over yonder,
There'll be singing over there.
When we sing and get together,
We'll enjoy ourselves.

One day we're gonna lay down our
life, for the Lord.
We're gonna lay down our life, for
the Lord.

6. Nearer, My God, to Thee
Four Eagles Quartet

In “Nearer, My God, to Thee,”
the lead singer of the *a cappella*
quartet, the Four Eagles from
Bessemer, Alabama, adds his own

“flavoring” to the Sam Cooke style
lead of this song, a successful hit of
the Soul Stirrers of Chicago.

Lead:
A minister was preaching
And the crowd was stood around
him
They were crying I could plainly
see
For the song that they sang was
touching
They were singing, “Nearer, my
God, to Thee.”

Chorus:
They kept on singing
“Nearer, my God, to Thee, nearer
to Thee, nearer to Thee...”
My trouble won't be so hard
If I can get nearer, nearer, my God,
to Thee.
I can bow down, and sing nearer
my God to Thee.
Whoah, nearer, my God to Thee.
And have mercy, Lord.

Verse:

Songs have a feeling,
There's a story in every song that
we sing,
Songs have been known to lift our
heavy burden.
In order to have that peace of
mind.
If you're a Christian, you ought not
to be ashamed,
To lift our voices in my Jesus's
name.
You ought to be able to sing,
"Nearer, nearer my God to
Thee."

7. Put Your Trust in Jesus

Angelic Harmonizers

The Angelic Harmonizers of
Selma, Alabama, are a mixed
ensemble. They perform a refresh-
ing arrangement of "Put Your
Trust in Jesus". This piece opens
with a powerful, stark, clean call-
and-response between the leader

and the background with "Said I
once was lost in darkness"
(response: "I once was lost in dark-
ness"). The background stands out
because the vocal lines are
stretched across three octaves, pro-
ducing a striking transparency to
the response background. The
effective use of stops further inten-
sifies the performance. From this
initial section, the song shifts into a
more familiar lead, "Put your trust
in Jesus," with the background
vamp: "He won't change; I know
He won't change."

Lead: I once was lost in darkness,

Response: I once was lost in darkness

Lead: And my way was dark as night.

I called on Christ my Savior,

To lead me to the light.

He heard me, when I called Him,

[repeat twice]

Right now, Lord, I am saved, by

grace.

Oh, what a joy to serve Him,
And praise His holy name.
He said He'd fight my battles,
If my faith in Him remain.
Whenever you are tempted,
Try not to complain.

Response: Just call on Christ the
Saviour,

When you need a doctor.

Response: Just call on Christ, the
Savior,

When you need a lawyer.

Response: Just call on Christ the Sav-
ior

He'll always remain the same.

That lets me know right now, I am
saved by grace.

Chorus:

Put your trust in Jesus, He won't
change [repeat twice]

I know Jesus will remain the same.

Vamp:

He won't change,

He won't change, I know He won't
change...

Just trust in Jesus,
He will surely bring you out.

Have no fear, 'cause the Man is
near.

I know Jesus,

He won't change, I know He won't
change,

I know Jesus will remain the same.

8. Who'll Be a Witness (For My Lord)?

Golden Gates Quartet

In "Who'll Be a Witness (For My
Lord)?" the Golden Gates of
Starkesville, Mississippi, are accom-
panied by a quiet "walking" bass
line played on the electric bass,
with rhythm and lead electric gui-
tar. Their performance of "Who'll
Be A Witness?" was by popular
request, and as soon as they started

this song on its journey the church began to rock. The skilled lead singer is extremely gifted in the highly appreciated tradition of taking the basic song text and structure as a guide for new variations, each one taking the composition higher: moving from the opening section that asks, “Who’ll be a witness (for my Lord)?” to a second section of “Tell me who” with the background doubling on the question with “Who be a witness?” to a third section that is a declaration stretched out in a beautiful rendering of testimonial poetry: “My soul,” cries the lead, with the background vocals rocking back with “My soul is a witness.”

Who’ll be a witness? [repeat three times]
For my Lord
Who will
Who’ll be a witness for my Lord?

Other lines:
I need a witness for my Lord,
Will y’all be a witness for my Lord?

Vamp 1:
Tell me who...?
Who be a witness?

Vamp 2:
Oh My soul...
My soul is a witness

9. Lead Me, Guide Me
Donald Vails and the Celebration Delegation

10. God Is So Good to Me
Donald Vails and the Celebration Delegation

“Lead Me, Guide Me,” the gospel hymn by Doris Akers, is performed by Donald Vails and the Celebration Delegation, with Reverend Vails in the lead. Then, without much of a break, Reverend

Vails moves into a powerful performance of Akers’s popular composition, “God Is So Good to Me.”

11. Couldn’t Hear Nobody Pray
Bernice Johnson Reagon

Thanks to twentieth-century multi-track audio recording technology, Bernice Johnson Reagon sings both lead and background parts in her performance of the spiritual, “Lord, I Couldn’t Hear Nobody Pray.” Dr. Reagon was born in Albany, Georgia, and is a curator at the Smithsonian Institution and a founding member of Sweet Honey in the Rock.

Chorus:
Lord, I couldn’t hear nobody pray,
And I couldn’t hear nobody pray.
Oh, way down yonder, by myself,
And I couldn’t hear nobody pray.

Refrain:
In the valley, on my knees,
Couldn’t hear nobody pray...
With my Jesus, and my Saviour.

Chilly water, in the Jordan,
Crossing over, into Canaan.

12. Peace in the Valley
Henry Davis Singers

Washington, D.C.’s Henry Davis Singers, directed by its founder, Henry Davis, Jr., perform a contemporary rendition of the African American gospel classic, “Peace in the Valley,” written by the “Father of Gospel Music,” Thomas Andrew Dorsey. Henry Davis, a graduate of the Howard University music department, was also a member of first gospel choir organized on a university campus (1968): the Howard Gospel Choir. As a composer and arranger, Davis draws

upon his training in gospel, secular, and European concert music traditions to create this salute to the father of gospel music.

I am tired and weary, but I must
toil on
'Til the Lord comes to call me
away.

Where the morning is bright and
the Lamb is the light,
And the night is as fair as the day.

Chorus:

There will be peace, peace, in the
valley for me.

There'll be peace in the valley for
me, oh, Lord,

No more sorrow, no more sadness,
no more troubles.

There will be,

There will be peace in the valley
for me.

13. **Hold to God's Unchanging Hand**

Union Temple Baptist Church

The Union Temple Baptist Church performed "Hold to God's Unchanging Hand" as a repetitive chant, vital to the worship service, on the first Sunday in August 1992. Michael, the lead, takes the choir again and again through the lyrics of this composition. It is arranged in two sections, the first opens with the call and response, "Hold on," and the second section is triggered by the tenors with "The billows may roll..."

Listen: Hold on —
Hold on, hold on, to God's
unchanging hand. [repeat]
Billows may roll, breakers may
dash,
I shall not stray, because He holds
me fast.

Though dark the day, clouds in the
sky,

I know it's all right, 'cause Jesus is
nigh.

Hold on, hold on, to God's
unchanging hand.

14. **Let All the People Praise Him**

St. Augustine Catholic Church
Gospel Choir

When gospel began to be popularized as worship music, it was welcomed into Pentecostal congregations that were already performing strongly emotion-driven music as a part of their worship services.

There was a struggle over gospel music within certain Baptist congregations, and most of the other denominations (Methodist, Episcopal, Catholic, Presbyterian, etc.) were hostile to the music that brought people into the expanding urban churches in droves during

the 1930s and 1940s. By the the 1960s, with the struggle for Civil Rights followed by the Black consciousness movements, many academic institutions and church denominations were forced open by African Americans who refused to lay their religion down. In Washington, D.C., the music of the Catholic Church was changed when Leon Roberts, composer and member of the class of that first Howard gospel choir, was invited to create a gospel mass. The result energized that historic African American congregation.

"Let All the People Praise Him" is performed by the St. Augustine Catholic Gospel Mass of Washington, D.C. It is a jubilant processional song that opens with a powerful, up-tempo gospel piano introduction that is swelled by other percussive instruments: chimes, tambourine, and a trap drum set.

When the choir has entered and is gathered at the front the cathedral, it explodes into a great congregational praise shout.

Let all the people praise Him,
Let all the people praise Him,
Let all the people praise your
name

Forever and forever more.
Let everybody, praise your name.

8. Yes, Lord

Bible Way Temple Radio Choir

The Bible Way Radio Choir closes the program with the Pentecostal chant, "Yes Lord," a signature of African American Pentecostal worship services, created by the founder of the Church of God In Christ (COGIC), Bishop Charles Mason.

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Selected Listening

If you want to hear more African American sacred music, here are a few suggestions:

1. Contemporary Gospel

If you have a local or regional radio station that plays gospel music, listen to it to learn which contemporary artists you particularly like. Then visit record stores in your community to find out which ones carry the best selection of African American sacred music, contemporary and historical. If you have an opportunity to travel to other cities, check out the gospel and sacred music sections of stores there.

2. Historical Recordings

Visit your local and regional record stores to find out which ones carry more traditional recordings of all kinds of music. Look for recordings of African American spirituals (sometimes found in the Classical or Vocal sections of the store). Check the Jazz and Folk Music sections for recordings by the artists you have heard on this recording. Many historical recordings are being reissued on CD. You might want to write to get on the mailing lists for the following catalogues:

Fantasy, Inc. This company is reissuing wonderful recordings from the Specialty Records archive: Tenth and Parker, Berkeley, CA 04710.

Malaco Music. This company now owns the Savoy Records catalogue. P.O. Box 9287, Jackson, MS 39286.

New World Records, 701 Seventh Ave., New York, NY 10030.

Roots and Rhythm, 6921 Stockton Avenue, El Cerrito, CA 94530.

Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings, 414 Hungerford Drive, Suite 444, Rockville MD 20850.

Credits:

Recording credits:

Tracks 1-8 recorded December 12, and 13, 1992, in Demopolis, Alabama by the National Public Radio *Wade In The Water* production team and the Smithsonian Institution. Producer, Judi Moore Latta; engineers Parris Morgan and Margo Kelly.

Tracks 9-10, 15 recorded February 4-5, 1993, Smithsonian Institution National Museum of American History, Washington, D.C. Event pro-

ducers, Niani Kilkenny and Lauren Rogers; recording producer, Judi Moore Latta; engineers Art Steele, Renee Pringle, Parris Morgan.

Track 11 recorded at Bias Studios, Springfield, Virginia. Producer, Bernice Reagon; engineer, Mike Zook.

Track 12 recorded May 22, 1993, Washington, D.C. Producer, Sonja Williams; engineer Renee Pringle.

Track 13 recorded July 4, 1993, at the Union Temple Baptist Church, Washington, D.C. Producers, Renee Pringle and Dackeyia Simmons; engineer Renee Pringle.

Track 14 recorded May 16, 1993, at the St. Augustine Catholic Church, Washington, D.C. Producer, Judi Moore Latta; engineer, Renee Pringle.

Mastered by Airshow Inc., Springfield, Virginia, David Glasser, engineer.

Produced by Bernice Johnson

Reagon and Toshi Reagon.

Notes by Bernice Johnson Reagon and Lisa Pertillar Brevard.

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Wade in the Water: A series on National Public Radio and four recordings on Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings:

**Volume I:
African American Spirituals:
The Concert Tradition**

**Volume II:
African American
Congregational Singing:
Nineteenth-Century Roots**

**Volume III:
African American Gospel:
The Pioneering Composers**

**Volume IV:
African American
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Smithsonian/Folkways

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Audience at program in African American Culture 1993 Gospel Conference.
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