

A sepia-toned photograph of a group of African American women in a church. They are wearing white dresses and have their hands raised in the air, some holding small white cards. They appear to be singing or praying. The background is dark and textured.

CLASSIC AFRICAN AMERICAN GOSPEL

from SMITHSONIAN FOLKWAYS



Smithsonian Folkways Recordings



from Smithsonian Folkways

1. **Jesus Going to Make Up My Dying Bed** Horace Sprott 4:20
2. **Oh Lord, I'm So Glad I Got Good Religion** Starlight Gospel Singers 2:22
3. **Thank You, Lord** Alvin Dockett and Blessed 3:46
4. **When I Was Sinkin' Down** The Fisk Jubilee Singers 2:32
5. **Just Got Over At Last** Little Brother Montgomery 2:19
6. **Moses Smote the Water** The Thrasher Wonders 2:00
7. **Soon, One Mornin'** Rev. Willie Gresham 4:56
8. **Dry Bones: Ezekiel Saw the Wheel** The Missionary Quartet 5:28
9. **Holy Ghost** Juanita Johnson and the Gospel Tones 3:15
10. **Where Could I Go** Sister Ernestine Washington with Bunk Johnson 2:50
(J.B. Coats / BMG Music Publishing, BMI)
11. **Oh, What a Beautiful City** Sonny Terry 2:23
12. **You've Got to Move** Two Gospel Keys 2:45
13. **Let the Church Say Amen** Elder Charles Beck 1:12
14. **I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say** Bishop Bowen and the Combined Gospel Choirs 4:47
15. **If I Had My Way** Rev. Gary Davis 4:43
(Rev. Gary Davis / Chandos Music, ASCAP)
16. **Low Down Death Right Easy** Dock Reed 2:15
17. **He's My Rock** Brother John Sellers 2:21
(Brother John Sellers / TRO-Hollis Music Inc., BMI)
18. **Hallelujah, It Is Done** Elizabeth Cotten 1:30
19. **We Praise Your Holy Name** Mississippi Mass Choir 5:49
20. **Don't Let His Name Go Down** First Independent Holy Church of God and Unity 1:24
21. **Go Tell It on the Mountain** Fannie Lou Hamer 3:01
22. **Been in the Storm So Long** Mary Pinckney 3:04
23. **Every Time I Feel the Spirit / Swing Low, Sweet Chariot /
They Hung Him on the Cross (medley)** Lead Belly 3:23
24. **It's Time to Make a Change** Madison's Lively Stones 3:18

INTRODUCTION

Kip Lornell

In the decades following Emancipation, the sacred songs and music of black Americans moved into the churches formed by newly freed slaves. These houses of worship provided spiritual leadership and fellowship as well as being community-based centers for social services and black culture. When blacks migrated from the rural South into cities and urban areas across the nation, they carried their music traditions with them. As they adapted to life in new locations, their music adapted as well. While retaining much traditional material, black sacred music incorporated new dimensions that developed into what we know today as gospel.

Twenty-first-century African American churches remain at the core of black spiritual, social, and cultural life throughout the United States. Even the most modern gospel has clear links to the past, utilizing traditional techniques in training and vocal style. These vocal styles retain their 19th-century roots by emphasizing “moans,” “growls,” “slides,” and other elements that have resonated in black sacred music for at least two centuries. Repertoire in particular can date back to the 19th century, for example, “Wade in the Water” and “Jesus Is on the Mainline.” While technological innovations including electric bass guitars and electronic organs can be found in most churches today, the core elements of black sacred music more often than not reflect its 19th-century beginnings. The Horace Sprott selection, “Jesus Going to Make up My Dying Bed,” was recorded in Alabama in the early 1950s but reflects the music that existed some one hundred years before. Despite post-modern innovations, the characteristics of African American religious music remain deep-seated in tradition.

This collection highlights the diversity of African American gospel music releases on Folkways and Smithsonian Folkways. The oldest performances were recorded at the end of World War II, while the

most recent selections capture the sounds of modern gospel music at the turn of the 21st century. The genres range from solo vocal performances recorded in the field to the unique ensemble work of the brass choirs featured in the United House of Prayer for All People.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Great Awakening, Camp Meetings, and Spirituals

The “Great Awakening” of the 1730s brought several important changes to American religious life, one of which was the enlivening of the tunes and words sung during services. Hymns based on religiously inspired poems rather than the psalms taken from biblical scripture gained favor. By the 1740s both whites and the blacks who attended church were singing hymns as part of each worship service.

The “Second Awakening” was the next religious movement to greatly impact America. A frontier revival phenomenon, it exerted its greatest force between 1790 and 1830. At camp meetings, some of which were integrated, great numbers of people lived and worshiped together for at least several days in temporary tents. Unique black singing styles developed as a result of these camp meetings, but the modest integration also resulted in mutual influences and the emergence of “spiritual songs” that found favor among both black and white singers.

“Spiritual” is a general term for 19th-century black American religious folk songs that are sometimes called anthems, jubilees, or gospel songs. While the term was not used in print prior to the 1860s, descriptions in travel accounts and diaries of songs that sound like spirituals exist as early as 1819. Although their origins are not entirely clear, spirituals are among the earliest sacred folk songs attributable to black culture. Arguments have been made for the white origins of African American spirituals, but the considerable interchange between white and black musical traditions prior to the Civil War makes conclusions problematic.

Spirituals are often characterized as sad or even sorrowful, with lyrics that often refer to death and escape. Two well-known spirituals, “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen” and “Roll Jordan,” lament the trials and difficulties of a life that was made doubly difficult by race and slavery. The refrain

“motherless children have a hard time when their mother’s dead” exemplifies the motifs of loss and separation. Texts could also express the hope of “stealing away” from slavery and the freedom of the North. In later years, particularly during the Civil Rights Movement that began in the 1950s, spirituals were sung to protest economic and social conditions in the South with refrains about “crossing the River of Jordan” and creating a new vision of America.

By the late 19th century spirituals were commonly found in hymnals and in other printed sources. Their arrangements grew more elaborate, were written in four-part harmony, and moved further from the folk practices. The “Jubilee” groups sent out by Fisk, Hampton, Tuskegee, and other pioneering colleges for blacks and Native Americans included singers trained in Western musical practices. They were also concertizing, rather than performing for a group of peers in a sacred setting. Still occasionally performed in the early 21st century, spirituals have been an important part of black folk culture for approximately 150 years.

Ring Shouts and Pentecostalism

A ring shout, one of the earliest forms of African American religious practice, combines physical movement with songs that are almost always spirituals. Ring shouts are reminiscent of some West African religious ceremonies and are still found in the rapidly modernizing sea islands off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia. They remain one of the closest and clearest connections between black American and African folk culture. Arguably the oldest form of Afro-American folk music to be heard today, ring shouts are one way that participants have of communicating directly with God through spontaneous movement and singing. The concept of divine communication links those who take part in a ring shout with adherents to Pentecostal beliefs.

Anyone attending an African American Pentecostal church in the 21st century would recognize some of the performance practices found in a ring shout. Both services are of indeterminate length—they last as long as the spirit of the “holy ghost” is present. Physical movement (sometimes called a “holy dance”) is an integral part of a ring shout and a Pentecostal church service, as is rhythm—men and women use body percussion at a ring shout, while a band (usually augmented by syncopated clapping and tambourines) holds forth at a Pentecostal church. Most of the participants are able to carry on three different rhythms

simultaneously with their feet, hands, and voice. Ring shouts and Pentecostal services can last for hours, sometimes all night, and eschew printed programs that tell you the service’s precise order.

Gospel

By the dawn of the 20th century the gospel song began penetrating and affecting the music heard in black church services. Spirituals arose from the devastating effects of slavery; their message of hope and of flight to a new land captured the attention of black Americans. Around the turn of the century, just as blues, ragtime, and jazz began emerging and legalized racism re-emerged, a younger generation of African Americans started composing simple “gospel” songs of praise. Within a decade these songs had attracted the attention of church-goers and, significantly, sheet music and songbook publishers. Such compositions drew from the black secular and sacred experience to create something new. While hymns are directed towards praising God, the messages of gospel songs are aimed at humankind—especially how to address the trials and tribulations of everyday life.

The term “gospel” has a number of definitions. For some it refers to any type of sacred selection, implying that the phrases “gospel music” and “religious music” are interchangeable. A “modern gospel song” is one that can be traced to a specific



composer—Thomas A. Dorsey, Cleavant Derricks, Rev. C.A. Tindley, Herbert W. Brewster, or Lucie Campbell. These early gospel songs were also the first type of black sacred music to be transmitted, first within small groups and then to a large audience, by way of the printed mass media. Gospel songs and the more emotional performance techniques are sometimes found among both black and white performers—especially as the genre became more widespread in the 1930s. Moreover, some gospel songs by white composers such as Albert Brumley (“I’ll Fly Away”) and Fannie Crosby (“Near the Cross”) became part of a shared black and white repertoire. This anthology uses the term in its broadest sense and includes 24 performances that come under this very broad umbrella.

In the 1930s interest in the contemporary gospel scene exploded. The works of the earlier gospel composers continued to gain popularity, primarily through their performances in church and the printed medium. Turn-of-the-century composing pioneers, such as Rev. C.A. Tindley, inspired the younger performers. By the early 1930s the commercial companies had expanded their recordings of sermons, vocal quartets, and guitar evangelists to include more of the increasingly popular gospel songs. Rev. Thomas A. Dorsey, aka “Georgia” Tom Dorsey, often referred to as the “Father of Gospel Music,” emerged as the most influential of the early gospel performers whose work was heralded and greatly advanced by the mass media. He along with Sisters Sallie Martin, Roberta Martin (no relation), and Willie Mae Ford Smith soon transformed Chicago into the center of commercialized gospel music for the African American community

Four-part harmony quartets provided one of the most important means by which religious songs were performed in the 1930s. Led by the Golden Gate Quartet, both secular and sacred vocal quartets were beginning their rise to prominence. Harmony-singing religious groups also featured a lead singer, whose dramatic but smooth *cante-fable* style clearly foreshadowed popular Motown singers like Smokey Robinson or Levi Stubbs. Independent record companies helped to fan the flames by issuing records by groups that enjoyed local or regional followings: New York City’s Trumpeteers on Score Records, the Harmonizing Four of Richmond (Virginia) on Gotham, and the Spirit of Memphis on King and Peacock.

Gospel music clearly benefited from the media’s attention. Although gospel recordings were not plentiful until after World War II, they did trickle out slowly. Radio proved more helpful as performers with Sunday programs increased, spreading the word to those who could not or did not attend

church services that featured this new music. The printed media became the most critical factor in disseminating gospel music throughout the community. Small publishing houses began printing songbooks containing the words and simple four-part musical notations for these new compositions. These songbooks sold well as gospel fans looked forward to each new edition.

Black gospel music represents a blend of musical as well as cultural innovation. First, it is music whose harmonic and melodic structure was deliberately similar to popular tunes. Composers like Dorsey felt that one way to reach a mass audience with a spiritual message was to package their songs in familiar musical setting. Second, the music’s message was straightforward, with themes that appealed to the heartstrings: mother, duty, and home. Third, it was simple, so that an audience would easily participate and become enveloped in gospel music. Fourth, gospel became the first African American religious music for which direct authorship of songs could be ascribed. Finally, gospel music emerged as the first style to be packaged with the mass media in mind and clearly aimed towards an increasingly sophisticated audience that looked to their radio, records, and printed sources for sacred music.

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Song Notes

1. JESUS GOING TO MAKE UP MY DYING BED

Horace Sprott, vocal

(from *Music from the South*, Vol. 4: *Horace Sprott*, 3FW CD 2653, 1955; recorded 20 April 1954, Perry County, Alabama)

Frederick Ramsey recorded Horace Sprott as part of an extended series of recordings in Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi in 1954 that were sponsored by the Guggenheim Foundation. At the time of this recording Sprott (born circa 1888 near Sprotts Plantation in central Alabama) sharecropped on a small cotton farm, where he also cut and hauled timber. Ramsey recorded enough material by Sprott to compile three long-play albums of sacred and secular songs on Folkways, which were issued as part of the ten-volume *Sounds of the South* series that featured a wide range of material from this extended field trip.

“Jesus Going to Make Up My Dying Bed” is a spiritual dating back to at least the mid-19th century. Rarely recorded by white musicians, it was recorded in the 1930s and 1940s by singers from across the South ranging from Mitchell’s Christian Singers (North Carolina) to Ella Mitchell in Lubbock, Texas. Sprott’s version is lyrically similar to other recorded versions but is distinctive in its direct, emotional power.

2. OH LORD, I’M SO GLAD I GOT GOOD RELIGION

Starlight Gospel Singers

Nathaniel Benson, bass; Joseph Massey, lead; Cleophus Sanders, second lead; Leophus Homes, tenor; James Belcher, alto; Ita T. Cash, third lead

(from *Music from the South*, Vol. 8: *Young Songsters* FW 2657, 1956; recorded 2 May 1954, Little Rock Baptist Church, Perry County, Alabama)

This male vocal group was also recorded as part of Ramsey’s lengthy 1954 field sessions. The late 1940s and early 1950s marked a period of intense commercial and popular interest in African American gospel music, particularly in quartets. Groups such as the Five Blind Boys of Alabama, Soul Stirrers, Swan Silvertones, and Golden Gate Quartet made scores of phonograph records and broadcast daily over the radio.

Although not as polished as their professional counterparts, the Starlight Gospel Singers are a rough and ready quartet consisting of six young men who lived in Hieberger, Alabama, some 30 miles northwest of Selma. Ramsey noted that their ages ranged from 16 to 20, except for the leader, Nathaniel Benson, who was then 37 years old. According to Ramsey’s notes for FW 2657, “the group, which began singing in 1952, had appeared in churches of all denominations throughout Bibb, Dallas, Hale, Perry, and Shelby Counties.”

The repertoire of the Starlight Gospel Singers appears to favor older spirituals, though that may reflect Ramsey’s bias to record and preserve what he perceived to be the older material being sung by this group and others he recorded for this project. Songs such as “In That New Jerusalem” and “All of My Troubles Soon Be Over” are both cut in this mold, as is “Oh Lord, I’m So Glad I Got Good Religion.”

3. THANK YOU, LORD

Alvin Dockett and Blessed, vocals; Peter Chatmon, keyboards; Davin Wright, drums

(from *Praise the Lord: Gospel Music in Washington, D.C.* SFW 40113, 1999; recorded 1998, Washington, D.C.)

Directed by Alvin Dockett, this mixed-gender vocal ensemble consists of high-school-aged students from in and around Washington, D.C. They achieve a thoroughly modern sound and have clearly listened to mass choirs—groups with scores of voices, such as Hezekiah Walker & The Love

Fellowship Crusade Choir or the L.A. Mass Choir. Choirs are not new, of course, but they have grown in popularity since the 1970s. James Cleveland, who wrote “Thank You, Lord,” was one of the leaders in this movement.

Alvin Dockett and Blessed formed in 1996 as an ad hoc organization, and it slowly grew into a permanent group. Although they are based in Washington, D.C., the group now travels throughout the mid-Atlantic states. They quite often perform in Virginia and North Carolina, where many of its members have family roots.

4. WHEN I WAS SINKIN' DOWN

The Fisk Jubilee Singers

(also known as “Wondrous Love”; from *Fisk Jubilee Singers* FW 2372, 1955; recorded 1954, possibly in Nashville, Tennessee)

Originating in 1871 as a singing group meant to promote the newly founded Fisk Free Colored School (1866), the Fisk Jubilee Singers have served as musical ambassadors across the globe. They toured Europe as early as the 1880s and had toured worldwide by the turn of the century. Always a mixed-gender group, the Fisk Jubilee Singers inspired many other historically black colleges and universities, from Hampton Institute (now University) to Claflin College (now University), to follow their lead in organizing small vocal ensembles to represent their institutions to the larger world.

The Fisk University Jubilee Quartet recorded as early as 1909, but the first recordings of the Fisk Jubilee Singers were not made until 1935. These recordings featured a stark, stripped-down version of the Jubilee Singers that included only one female voice. It was not until after World War II that the entire group was recorded.

These mid-1950s recordings were made under the direction of John W. Work, who had been affiliated with the group since the late 1920s. Work was known not only as a singer and music director of the Jubilee Singers, he also displayed a keen interest in black vernacular music that resulted in *American Negro Songs and Spirituals* (1960). Work also composed several dozen extended orchestral pieces and at least one symphony.

“When I Was Sinkin’ Down,” better known as “Wondrous Love,” is a song in a minor key with roots in early 19th-century hymnody. Its words are usually attributed to Alexander Means, and the basic melody can be found in *The Southern Harmony and Musical Companion*, by William Walker (New York:

Hastings House, 1835). It’s not a song often found or heard in African American tradition and is more often encountered in the sacred harp tradition as well as among Southern gospel singers.

5. JUST GOT OVER AT LAST

Little Brother Montgomery, vocal and piano

(from *Church Songs: Sung and Played on the Piano by Little Brother Montgomery* FW 31042, 1975; recorded circa 1962, Chicago, Illinois)

There are a handful of songs that express the sentiment of accomplishing, succeeding, or reaching a goal through the use of the colloquial phrase “done got over at last.” In the secular world, both Bo Diddley (“Oh Baby”) and Fats Domino (“Natural Born Lover”) use this phrase in R & B songs recorded in the 1960s. In the religious world, the Florida Mass Choir’s performance of “Done Got Over At Last,” recorded for Malaco records in the 1990s, is built on this sentiment. The words to Montgomery’s spare version suggest that it may have roots in the sanctified church and celebrates a move from the secular to the sacred world.

Little Brother Montgomery is best known as a blues piano player, with a career that stretched back to the 1920s. He began playing barrelhouse piano in Louisiana turpentine camps and in Delta juke joints before moving to Chicago, where he lived the rest of his life. In addition to solo blues piano work, Montgomery also worked with small jazz groups, and he recorded extensively (debuting in 1930) before he passed away in 1985.

6. MOSES SMOTE THE WATER

The Thrasher Wonders

Andrew Thrasher, Gerhart Thrasher, and Bernice Thrasher, vocals

(from *The Asch Recordings, 1939 to 1947 - Vol. 1: Blues, Gospel, and Jazz* FW 00AA1, 1966; recorded late 1945, New York City)

The symbiotic relationship between gospel music and pop music in the 20th century is a long and well-documented one. Generally speaking, gospel music has informed secular genres, most notably do-wop and soul. Many artists from Lou Rawls to Sam Cooke to Aretha Franklin began their careers in the

church and went on to sing in night clubs.

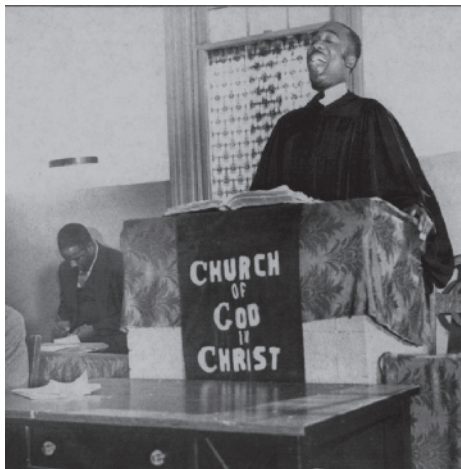
The two male members of The Thrasher Wonders followed a similar path. This shift from the sacred to the secular occurred about eight years following their recording debut for Folkways founder Moses Asch, when they recorded “Moses Smote the Water” plus six other selections. Specifically, when Atlantic rejected Clyde McPhatter’s initial group (The Mt. Lebanon Gospel Singers), McPhatter recruited versatile gospel singers Bill Pinkney from the Southern Knights, and brothers Gerhardt and Andrew Thrasher from The Thrasher Wonders to join a new pop group, the Drifters. They signed with Atlantic in 1953, thereby establishing the foundation upon which a music legacy continues today.

7. SOON, ONE MORNIN’

Reverend Willie Gresham and his congregation

(also known as “Somebody Calling My Name,” “Somebody Calling Me,” “Soon One Mornin’”; from *Folk Visions and Voices: Traditional Music and Song in Northern Georgia* - Vol. 1 FW 34161, 1984; recorded 31 December 1977, Greater Macedonian Baptist Church, Athens, Georgia)

Recorded on site, this mournful spiritual is a powerful, emotional performance. It’s not really a lined-out performance, but Gresham is clearly the leader with the congregation closely following him. Apparently Gresham learned this song from his father, and it remained one of his favorites. It’s a slow and deliberate song that unfolds at its own pace.



Also known as “Somebody Calling My Name” or “Somebody Calling Me,” “Soon, One Mornin’” reflects the down home, community, and cooperative nature of gospel music before so much of the music moved into the commercial mainstream in the mid-20th century. This performance is an important reminder that the majority of gospel music is performed where it began—in a church.

8. DRY BONES: EZEKIEL SAW THE WHEEL

The Missionary Quintet

Five male voices

(from *Gospel Songs* FW 6824, 1954; recorded 1953, Nassau, Bahamas)

Nothing is known about this group, except that they were recorded by jazz historian and dance ethnographer Marshal Stearns. They sound like a polished local or perhaps even a semi-professional group, and their recorded repertoire is decidedly conservative. In addition to this well-known spiritual, the group recorded “Let the Church Roll On,” “Give Me That Old Time Religion,” and “I Got a Home in That Rock.”

9. HOLY GHOST

Juanita Johnson and the Gospel Tones

Juanita Johnson, Alfred Charleston, James Nails, Ollie Jones, and Thomas Coles, vocals and instruments

(from *Climbing High Mountains* FW 31037, 1974; recorded circa 1973, probably in Grand Rapids, Michigan)

The “Holy Ghost” refers to the spirit of God felt by Christians who believe in the direct connection between God and human beings. This feeling, most often expressed by members of Pentecostal churches, is described in many ways. Lead vocalist Johnson sings:

One day as I was burdened, I began to pray.

Jesus came from heaven, washed my sins away.

I was running, starting shouting, there was no room for doubt.

Holy Ghost done fell on me.

This group, formed in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in 1964 by Alfred Charleston, sounds like a semi-professional ensemble. In addition to singing at churches throughout central and southern Michigan, the group toured extensively in the mid-South in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Their travel to perform in churches and auditoriums from Memphis southward makes sense in light of their roots: each of the group members was born in southern Mississippi. No doubt higher-wage jobs in the automobile factories and manufacturing plants that dot central Michigan provided the incentive for them to move north in the 1950s.

10. WHERE COULD I GO

Sister Ernestine Washington, vocal; Bunk Johnson, trumpet; Jim Robinson, trombone; George Lewis, clarinet; Alton Purnell, piano; Lawrence Marrero, banjo; Alcide “Slow Drag” Pavageau, string bass; Warren “Baby” Dodds, drums

(from *The Asch Recordings, 1939 to 1947 - Vol. 1: Blues, Gospel, and Jazz* FW 00AA1, 1966; recorded 1 January 1946, New York City)

The legendary New Orleans trumpeter Bunk Johnson resurfaced during the “jazz revival” that began in the late 1930s. His career was resuscitated by the publication of *Jazzmen* (Frederick Ramsey and Charles Edward Smith), the first book on jazz, which appeared in 1938. During the 1940s Johnson played and recorded with artists as diverse as Lead Belly, Louis Armstrong, and Sidney Bechet as well as Ms. Washington.

Born in Arkansas sometime in the teens, Sister Ernestine B. Washington grew up attending the Church of God in Christ—the largest black American Pentecostal church, which was founded in the late 19th century. Much of her ministry was accomplished at the church ministered by her husband, Washington Temple COGIC. Washington, a robust woman, possessed a powerful voice similar to that of Mahalia Jackson.

“Where Could I Go” is a well-known gospel hymn written by the highly regarded and prolific J.B. Coats. It’s one of those songs that has been performed by white and black artists alike throughout the 20th century. The roster of artists, many of whom are more closely associated with the secular world, who have recorded this hymn include Elvis Presley, the Harmonizing Four, Emmylou Harris, Ferlin Husky, and Roy Acuff.

11. OH, WHAT A BEAUTIFUL CITY

Sonny Terry, vocal and harmonica

(also known as “Twelve Gates to the City”; from *Blues with Big Bill Broonzy, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee* FW 3817, 1959; recorded circa early 1950s, New York City)

Because it only features voice and harmonica, this track seems almost too simple in its execution. But don’t be fooled. Its deceptive simplicity belies the effectiveness of the complex and well-timed interplay between Terry’s voice and this 10-hole free reed instrument. Terry often performed in the company of other musicians (most notably his long-time partner, guitarist/vocalist Brownie McGhee), but he also recorded a surprisingly large body of solo material as well.

Terry’s extensive recorded legacy includes a wide range of secular and sacred songs. Growing up in Georgia in the 1920s exposed Terry to blues and blues-related material. Some of his best recordings feature his voice and harmonica imitating what he heard around him, such as trains and the sounds of animals in the woods, on selections such as “Locomotive Blues” and “Lost John.”

“Beautiful City” is also known as “Twelve Gates to the City” and is clearly inspired by the Bible’s Revelation 21. It’s a song that appears much more often in the repertoire of black musicians than white and seems to be more commonly performed by musicians from the Southeast than other parts of the country. In the 1930s it was recorded by musicians such as the Golden Gate Quartet, Blind Boy Fuller, and the Rev. Gary Davis, all of whom had strong ties to the Carolinas. Very rarely (and inexplicably) have African American musicians from outside of this region of the country recorded this song.



12. YOU'VE GOT TO MOVE

Two Gospel Keys

Emma Daniels, vocal and guitar; Mother Sally Jones, vocal and tambourine

(from *The Asch Recordings, 1939 to 1947 - Vol. 1: Blues, Gospel, and Jazz* FW 00AA1, 1966; recorded circa late 1945, New York City)

“When the Lord gets ready, you got to move” intimates that the power of God is difficult to resist. All that is known about these two evangelizing women are their names and their membership in the Church of God in Christ. One could easily imagine them playing on the streets of Brooklyn in the mid-1940s, bringing their message of salvation through an acceptance of Jesus. The only problem with this scenario is that their final recorded selection (for the New York City-based Red Robin label, circa 1953) is labeled as by “Two Gospel Keys of Atlanta, GA.” Perhaps the two women had migrated north to New York, perhaps they moved south and then relocated back to New York? Whatever the geographical facts, these two women were clearly “Holy Ghost” singers with voices that suggest that they were not young when they recorded.

13. LET THE CHURCH SAY AMEN

Elder Charles D. Beck and choir, vocals; unknown piano

(from *Urban Holiness Service* FW 8901, 1957; recorded 30 or 31 December 1956, Buffalo, New York)

Prior to this field recording, which was done at his The Way of the Cross Church of God in Christ, Elder Beck enjoyed a long and distinguished recording career. Billed as “The Singing Evangelist,” Beck first recorded for Decca in 1937. These sessions and the subsequent ones for Bluebird, Gotham, and other labels usually featured his impassioned singing along with his trumpet or piano playing. This selection features call-and-response, and its fervent style is typical of the services held in the Church of God in Christ.

Although he resided in Buffalo and Pittsburgh in the 1940s and 1950s, Beck was born in Mobile, Alabama, shortly after the turn of the century. His mother migrated to the United States from Ghana, but his father remained in Africa, living mostly in eastern Nigeria. At the time of this recording, Beck’s father had recently been elected Bishop of the Holiness Churches in Ghana. He also reached folks in the United States by way of his radio broadcasts, which were carried over a 30-station network.

14. I HEARD THE VOICE OF JESUS SAY

Bishop Bowen and the Combined Gospel Choirs

(from *Hand-Me-Down Music: Old Songs, Old Friends - Vol. 2 Traditional Music of Union County, North Carolina* FW 34152, 1980; recorded late 1970s, Union County, North Carolina)

With its impassioned, improvisatory lead vocal and its chorus, which usually in Pentecostal music eschews clearly defined harmonies favor of emotion, this performance clearly reflects its Pentecostal roots. At the time of this recording in the late 1970s, Bowen, who founded the Glorious Fire Baptized Holiness Church of God, Incorporated, was living and pastoring a church in Pageland, South Carolina. He was featured in a 1977 documentary about African American gospel music, produced by WBTV (Charlotte, North Carolina) and hosted by Odetta. One hopes that his appearance in this film documentary was as dynamic as the performance he leads on this compact disc.

The song is most often heard among African American sacred singers and is almost never encountered among white gospel singers. It was first recorded in the early 1920s by artists as diverse as the Biddleville (University) Quintette and the Pace Jubilee Singers. The song itself probably dates back to the early to mid-19th century and had become so well known by the 1920s that medicine show entertainers Bogus Ben Covington and Jim Jackson recorded a hilarious parody, “I Heard the Voice of a Pork Chop Say.”



15. IF I HAD MY WAY

Rev. Gary Davis, vocal and guitar

(from *If I Had My Way: Early Home Recordings* SFW 40123, 2003; recorded 1953, New York City)

Born in Laurens, South Carolina, in 1896, Reverend Davis moved to New York City in the late 1930s and became one of the most widely known guitarists of the “folk revival” that began in the late 1950s. As a finger-picking guitarist Rev. Gary Davis was a towering figure who directly influenced artists as diverse as Jerry Garcia, Ry Cooder, Dave Van Ronk, Jorma Kaukonen, and Stefan Grossman. And as a composer and interpreter of sacred and secular music such as “Baby, Let Me Follow You Down” and “Death Don’t Have No Mercy” he created a substantial body of work that has been recorded by, among others, Bob Dylan, Jackson Browne, Peter, Paul & Mary, and the Grateful Dead. Davis died in 1972, but his legacy remains strong and clear.

This version of “If I Had My Way” was preserved on tape by John Cohen as part of a series of recordings from 1953. They are among the first “field” recordings of Davis, whose first commercial recordings were made for ARC in 1935. Cohen was fascinated by Davis’ complex finger-picking style and the handful of previous commercial recordings that were long out of print and difficult to obtain. Beginning in the late 1950s Davis’ rising status in the folk revival led to numerous recordings that appeared on long-play records, and many are now available on compact disc. Cohen’s field recording of “If I Had My Way,” which Davis often performed live and subsequently recorded on numerous occasions, marks the first time Davis recorded this song.



16. LOW DOWN DEATH RIGHT EASY

Dock Reed, vocal

(from *Negro Folk Music of Alabama, Vol. 2: Religious Music* FW 4418, 1956; recorded February 1950, Livingston, Alabama)

“Songster” is an older term sometimes used to describe a black American folk singer with a wide musical repertoire that included minstrel songs, blues, ballads, and religious songs. Mississippi John Hurt, Pink Anderson, Blind Gary Davis, and Dock Reed all fall into this category. Reed, who first recorded “Low Down Death Right Easy” for the Library of Congress almost exactly a decade before this session, went on to record a wide range of material, all of which had a spiritual undertone. Songs such as “Well, It’s So Dark,” “Trouble So Hard,” and “Free At Last” not only call to mind the tradition of 19th-century spirituals, they underscore the fact that so much African American music, whether overtly religious or avowedly secular, frequently contains an underlying message of struggle and salvation. Not a well-known spiritual, “Low Down Death Right Easy” is a typical Reed performance characterized by his dark, expressive, highly ornamented voice.

17. HE’S MY ROCK

Brother John Sellers, vocals; Ernest Henry, organ; Herman Stevens, piano; Micky Baker, guitar; Lloyd Trotman, bass; David “Panama” Francis, drums

(from *Baptist Shouts and Gospel Songs* MON 335; recorded August 1959, New York City)

A standard gospel hymn over the past 60 years, “He’s My Rock” has been recorded many times by Southern gospel and black gospel singers, and also by artists ranging from contemporary country star Randy Travis to the famous African American gospel quartet the Soul Stirrers. The earliest version by a black group, the Golden Eagle Gospel Singers, was made in 1940. Sellers’ version, with its organ, piano, bass, and drum accompaniment, is very much in the style of urban black gospel music that emerged in the 1940s. The song’s theme, which underscores stability and reliability, represents very mainstream Protestant Christian theology.

Not only a gospel singer, singer/songwriter Brother John Sellers was known for his folksy mix of blues, jazz, and gospel. Born May 27, 1924, in Clarksdale, Mississippi, Sellers performed in gospel tent shows before being discovered by gospel great Mahalia Jackson. Jackson urged him to migrate to

Chicago, where he not only sang in local churches, often with her, but also performed with blues singer Big Bill Broonzy, with whom he did some recording in Europe. He recorded many gospel sides before turning much of his attention to secular music. In the late 1950s he moved to New York City where he met choreographer Alvin Ailey; the two began a long collaboration that produced such dance pieces as *Revelations* and *Blues Suite*. Following a long and varied career, Brother John Sellers died in Manhattan on March 27, 1999.

18. HALLELUJAH, IT IS DONE

Elizabeth Cotten, banjo and vocal

(from *Shake Sugaree* SFW 40147, 2004; recorded February 1965, Princeton, New Jersey)

Elizabeth Cotten was among the most influential guitarists to surface during the folk music revival that began in the late 1950s, and her expressive and dexterous finger-picking style was a major inspiration to a younger generation of players. “Libba” Cotten, born in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, in 1895, began playing the banjo at the age of eight but soon moved on to her brother’s guitar. By the age of 12 she was working as a domestic, and three years later she gave birth to her first child. Shortly thereafter she joined the church and all but gave up playing guitar for nearly 25 years. During the early years of World War II, Cotten had relocated to Washington, D.C., where she eventually began working for the legendary musicologists Ruth and Charles Seeger, whose children included Pete, Peggy, and Mike.

In time the Seegers learned of Cotten’s guitar skills, and they recorded her for Folkways, resulting in her 1957 debut LP, *Folksongs and Instrumentals*. The track “Freight Train,” which she fashioned as a child, became a Top Five hit in the UK and emerged as her signature tune. The surprising interest in her music spurred her to write new material and revisit the music of her childhood, such as “Hallelujah, It Is Done.” The lyrics of her spare version are based on an 1876 gospel hymn, “Hallelujah, ‘Tis Done,” written by Phillip P. Bliss and first published in *Gospel Hymns* #2.

Cotten continued to work as a domestic until 1970, touring only occasionally in the 1960s. But during the 1970s and into the early 1980s, Cotten toured actively. In the 1980s she was honored with a National Endowment for the Arts National Heritage Fellowship as well as a GRAMMY. Libba Cotten died on June 29, 1987.

19. WE PRAISE YOUR HOLY NAME

Mississippi Mass Choir

(from *The Mississippi River of Song: A Musical Journey Down the Mississippi* SFW 40086, 1998)

Although the phrase “we praise your holy name” is uttered weekly at Christian church services across the world, this particular song appears to be unique to the Mississippi Mass Choir. This 100-voice ensemble, whose motto is “serving God through song,” was one of the most influential gospel groups of the late 1980s and the late 1990s. Their 1988 debut, *Live*, reached the top of the Billboard Chart and remained a top-selling gospel album for nearly a year. *Live* also earned the group the James Cleveland GMWA awards as contemporary choir of the year and new traditional artist of the year. Determined to bring together the best gospel voices in Mississippi, Frank Williams (a member of the Jackson Southernaires and an employee of the Jackson, Mississippi-based Malaco label) founded the group in 1987 and soon signed them to his employee’s label. Since then the group has recorded a half-dozen commercially and artistically successful albums.

20. DON’T LET HIS NAME GO DOWN

First Independent Holy Church of God and Unity

Annie L. Fitts, Elma Sawyer, Jennie Jackson, Brother Williams, vocals with drum, cymbals, guitar, and tambourine

(from *Music from the South, Vol. 9: Song and Worship* FW 2658, 1956; recorded 15 April 1954, Marion, Alabama)

The United States’ religious landscape is dotted with small Holiness churches that range from urban storefront churches to groups that worship in tiny rural structures. Formed sometime in the 1940s by Elder Effie Hall, the First Independent Holy Church of God and Unity was serving a small band of the faithful when Frederick Ramsey recorded this ensemble in Marion, Alabama (some 75 miles southwest of Birmingham). That this Holiness church was founded by Effie Hall is significant because, unlike many of the mainstream Protestant churches, Pentecostal churches offered women more opportunities for leadership.

The use of a variety of relatively simple-to-play percussive instruments, its simple guitar accompaniment, and its passionate vocal ensemble place this performance very much in the mainstream of mid-20th century African American Pentecostal music. “Don’t Let His Name Go Down” has rarely

been recorded and almost always by black gospel performers. In addition to this selection, a similar song was recorded by the Sensational Nightingales (1964).

21. GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN

Fannie Lou Hamer

(from *Voices of the Civil Rights Movement: Black American Freedom Songs 1960-1966* SFW 40084, 1997; recorded fall 1963, Greenwood, Mississippi)

Through her words and deeds Fannie Lou Hamer, a Mississippi sharecropper, helped to change our perspective on democracy. Hamer became involved in the Civil Rights Movement when she volunteered to attempt to register to vote for the first time at age 45 in 1962. Hamer soon lost her job, suffered a brutal beating, and continually risked her life because of her civil rights activism. More publicly she raised money for the movement and helped organize the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), which challenged white domination of the Democratic Party. In 1964, the MFDP contested the all-white Mississippi delegation to the Democratic Convention, and in 1968, the Convention seated an integrated challenge delegation from Mississippi. She continued political activities as well, helping to convene the National Women's Political Caucus in the 1970s. She is buried in her hometown of Ruleville, Mississippi, where her tombstone reads, "I am sick and tired of being sick and tired."

Her performance of "Go Tell It on the Mountain" is unusual because the song is most often sung, as by historically black colleges, and universities' choirs, as a carefully arranged spiritual. This version, which was sung as part of a mass civil rights rally, is much more lively and spontaneous. Along with older spirituals such as "Wade in the Water" and "Been in the Storm So Long," this song underscores the connection between the struggle for freedom in the 1860s and its reprise one hundred years later.



22. BEEN IN THE STORM SO LONG

Mary Pickney, lead vocals

(from *Been in the Storm So Long: A Collection of Spirituals, Folk Tales and Children's Games from Johns Island, SC* SFW 40031, 1990)

Still sung in the South Carolina and Georgia Sea Islands as a communal "moaning" spiritual, "Been in the Storm So Long" dates to the ante-bellum period. Lead singer Mary Pickney grew up on Johns Island, South Carolina, and learned this song as a child in the 1930s. Its lyrics generally reference life's struggles, and the trials of enslaved African Americans in particular. This decades-old, evocative title remains powerful enough more than a hundred years after the song itself emerged that it was used by Leon Litwack for his classic 1980 study of African Americans after emancipation, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (1975), and a 2005 University of Massachusetts exhibition, *Been in the Storm So Long: Photographs of the Black South* by Julius Lester.



23. EVERY TIME I FEEL THE SPIRIT / SWING LOW, SWEET CHARIOT / THEY HUNG HIM ON THE CROSS (MEDLEY)

Lead Belly

Huddie Ledbetter, vocal and guitar

(from *Lead Belly Sings for Children* SFW 45047, 1999)

This medley consists of three well-known songs that Lead Belly identifies with particular denominations during the introductions to each selection: "Every Time I Feel the Spirit" (Methodist), "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" (Baptist), and "They Hung Him on the Cross" (Holy Ghost). Only "They Hung Him on the Cross," which Lead Belly associated with Pentecostal church congregations, is an

extended performance, with “Every Time I Feel the Spirit” barely more than a restatement of the title.

Lead Belly, born around 1885 in Mooringsport, Louisiana, is perhaps the most popular and influential African American folk singer of the 20th century. In addition to his close personal association with Pete Seeger, Brownie McGhee, and Woody Guthrie, Lead Belly produced recordings that have influenced following generations of singers interested in grassroots American music. He gained some of his greatest satisfaction from playing for children, and during the 1940s his New York City apartment attracted many children who came by to be entertained by him, and to eat his wife Martha’s cooking. These selections were initially issued on a 1960 Folkways album entitled *Negro Folk Songs for Young People*.

24. IT’S TIME TO MAKE A CHANGE

Madison’s Lively Stones

(from *Saints’ Paradise: Trombone Shout Bands from the United House of Prayer* SFW 40117, 1999; recorded 1 April 1994, Wolf Trap Farm Park, Vienna, Virginia)

There are precedents for the brass bands that rock the halls of contemporary United House of Prayer for All People churches, a Pentecostal organization that is most popular in the region between New York City and Charlotte, North Carolina. In the late 19th century brass bands dotted the musical landscape of African Americans in the deep mid-South, especially among the “creoles of color” who lived in the liminal world between black and white citizens of New Orleans. The creoles of color had unusual access to educational and business opportunities unavailable to black citizens. One result of this access was the development of jazz in New Orleans.



By the time that Daddy Grace founded the United House of Prayer for All People (in the teens), jazz and hot dance music were spreading across the county. Grace’s churches adopted this musical trend, and “shout” bands became incorporated into their services as early as the middle 1920s. “Shouting” (an ecstatic state that involves speaking in tongues, improvised dancing, and singing/performing on a musical instrument) has been part of African American worship services since the late 18th century.

The trombone-led shout bands, which feature mostly male musicians, perform not only at Sunday church services, they also praise the Lord at funerals, church convocations, parades, and baptisms. Drums, cymbals, and sousaphones accompany the trombones in a powerful and emotional wall of sound. Madison’s Lively Stones (formed in 1985 and based in Washington, D.C.) is very much in this mode and has younger players than most of the other shout bands. Their mid-tempo version of “It’s Time to Make a Change” features a walking bass-line and a stirring, attention-grabbing opening riff as well as the underlying message to look to God for direction and purpose in life.



Discography

Various artists. *Been in the Storm So Long*. Smithsonian Folkways 40031.

An anthology of Georgia Sea Island material that includes examples of spirituals, shouts, and prayers recorded in the early 1960s.

Various artists. *Wade in the Water, African American Sacred Music Traditions*, Box Set. Smithsonian Folkways 40076-2-4.

A fine survey of contemporary genres. The four compact discs (*African American Spirituals: The Concert Traditions*, *African American Congregational Singing: Nineteenth Century Roots*, *African American Gospel: The Pioneering Composers*, and *African American Community Gospel*) are also available separately.

Sources

Allen, Ray. 1992. *Singing in the Spirit: African-American Sacred Quartets in New York City*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

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An account of the life and times of one of the most influential gospel soloists of the 1950s and 1960s.

Young, Alan. 1997. *Woke Up This Morning: Black Gospel Singers and the Gospel Life*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

An examination of the music and lives of mostly contemporary, community-based Southern black gospel singers.

Video

The Gospel According to Al Green. Mug-Shot Production/Magnum Entertainment, Inc.
A lengthy examination of this former soul singer's interesting and varied career, including scenes shot in his Pentecostal church in Memphis.

Sacred Steel. Arhoolie Foundation Films.
A documentary that describes several African American steel guitarists who participate in worship services in House of God Church, Keith Dominion Holiness churches found between Florida and New York.

Say Amen, Somebody. Xenon Studios.
A stirring 1 ½-hour documentary directed by George T. Nierenberg that includes some of the most important figures in the history of black gospel music such as Rev. Dorsey and Willie Mae Ford Smith.

Singing Stream. Shanachie 1402.
A documentary that provides a fine contextual and musical look at the Landers Family of gospel singers based in Granville County, North Carolina.

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