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Authors	Castellini, Michael
Citation	Castellini, Michael. "Sit In, Stand Up and Sing Out!: Black Gospel Music and the Civil Rights Movement." Thesis. Georgia State University, 2013. https://doi.org/10.57709/4313193
DOI	https://doi.org/10.57709/4313193
Download date	2026-03-06 20:11:58
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14694/8422

SIT IN, STAND UP AND SING OUT!:
BLACK GOSPEL MUSIC AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

by

MICHAEL CASTELLINI

Under the Direction of Dr. John McMillian

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the relationship between black gospel music and the African American freedom struggle of the post-WWII era. More specifically, it addresses the paradoxical suggestion that black gospel artists themselves were typically escapist, apathetic, and politically uninvolved—like the black church and black masses in general—despite the “classical” Southern movement music being largely gospel-based. This thesis argues that gospel was in fact a critical component of the civil rights movement. In ways open and veiled, black gospel music always spoke to the issue of *freedom*. Topics include: grassroots gospel communities; African American sacred song and coded resistance; black church culture and social action; freedom songs and local movements; socially conscious or activist gospel figures; gospel records with civil rights themes.

INDEX WORDS: African American history, African American music, Gospel music, Civil rights movement

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2013

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Electronic Version Approved

Office of Graduate Studies

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

August 2013

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to all the gospel soldiers in the long struggle for human freedom. Their example proves the miraculous depth, strength, and creativity of the human spirit. The world really needs “good news” these days. Let us all pray, believers and nonbelievers together, that we get some soon.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to collectively acknowledge the Georgia State University Department of History. Extra thanks to my thesis advisor Dr. John McMillian. Much gratitude to Dr. Jacqueline Rouse for her important seminar in African American history, which generated the present thesis; in short, this would not have been without her. Heartfelt appreciation goes to Dr. Joseph B. Perry III. And the deepest debt is owed to Dr. Isa Blumi.

Enormous thanks to Baylor University journalism professor and black gospel music historian Robert Darden, as well as Denyse Rodgers of the Black Gospel Music Restoration Program at Baylor. Of course, this project would be nowhere if not for the dedicated, perhaps obsessive legion of gospel collectors, compilers, and scholars that have documented and propounded this most profoundly influential and disgracefully underappreciated of American musics.

Most of all I thank my parents, Robert and Dianne, and my wife Amie.

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INTRODUCTION

Following is an exploration of the relationship between black gospel music and the civil rights movement. The latter played out during the vintage years of the former: that is, black gospel and the African American freedom struggle both peaked in the same period after World War II. By unpacking the fundamental, if sometimes obscured connections between music and movement, this thesis holds that gospel was a critical component of the postwar freedom struggle.

The more direct connections concern the familiarity, flexibility, and popularity of the music itself. Gospel music was used throughout the civil rights movement to attract the masses, encourage youth participation, invigorate meetings, and instill confidence. The “freedom songs” were based on familiar spirituals and gospel songs, typically performed in a gospel style. From local elders to student organizers, movement songleaders were immersed in the musical traditions of the black church, as well as the black-oriented radio and commercial gospel of the time. Likewise, the rank-and-file foot soldiers came from the same grassroots “gospel community” of church goers, choir members, radio listeners, and record buyers.

Beyond these concrete examples there are less tangible, though no less meaningful connections. As a devoted writer, record producer, and longtime fan, Anthony Heilbut gained the confidence of many prominent gospel veterans. In his 1971 book *The Gospel Sound*, the first (and best) full-length work on the subject, Heilbut remarked that gospel “reflects the conditions and the consciousness of its audience, no more, no less.” Even after the tumultuous 1960s had effectively politicized American popular culture, he maintained that gospel’s mass black audience “can still turn nowhere else for such free and passionate expression of their deepest needs, fears, and resentments.”¹

Activist minister Wyatt Tee Walker lauded Heilbut’s in-depth study as “a book of considerable import in the field of music, secular or sacred.” A key official in the organization of Martin Luther King, Jr., Reverend Walker wrote his own book tracing the history of black sacred music and social change. Noting that black gospel was a huge field with “more devotees than any other music form in America,”

¹ Anthony Heilbut, *The Gospel Sound: Good News and Bad Times (Updated and Revised 25th Anniversary Ed.)* (New York: Limelight Editions, [1971] 1997), 298.

Walker concurred with Heilbut on its meaning to the African American masses: “Gospel music, at bottom, is religious folk music that is clearly identifiable with the social circumstances of the Black community in America.” And like Heilbut, who profiled a number of the music’s foremost figures, Walker believed that the gospel worldview “is best traced through its exponents and their experiences, hardships, and tribulations.”²

Not unlike the civil rights movement, or African American history in general, the so-called “gospel life” was filled with hopeful faith as well as bitter disappointment. Some gospel publishers and promoters made fortunes off the ignorance or relative powerlessness of singers, who usually had to peddle records and pictures at programs to supplement their incomes. Travel requirements forced upon gospel artists even greater exposure to the racism, segregation, and physical dangers facing blacks in America. And of course there were the innumerable nonprofessional, noncommercial gospel performers in churches and local venues across the country singing for little or no remuneration whatsoever.

These main points form the crux of this thesis: gospel music was an organic part of the black community that gained widespread popularity during the postwar period; gospel closely reflected the African American condition, as well as the consciousness of its mass fan base; and thus black gospel performers, a largely poor and exploited class of artists, embodied the African American experience while being its most natural cultural interpreters. Gospel communicated black cultural values, reinforced black identity, and shaped the sociopolitically conscious “soul” phenomenon that promoted black pride. The sacred family tree of gospel, spirituals, soul, and freedom songs together formed the soundtrack of the civil rights movement. As the common thread in civil rights music, and as an invaluable organizational and motivational tool, black gospel unquestionably played a leading role in the movement story.

Black music has always been in ongoing interplay with black church culture. The black church has been the most vital institution in African American history, and the major source of black protest up to the modern civil rights movement. Though the African American population atomized and secularized

² Wyatt Tee Walker, *“Somebody’s Calling My Name”: Black Sacred Music and Social Change* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1979), 128, 147.

in the decades before the movement, developing alternative organizations and sociopolitical spheres, these other realms never completely separated from the black church. The black populace did fracture, and the black church did split into multiple denominations and sects, but the divisions were never too severe, and African Americans maintained a sense of unity through an extraordinary shared historical experience.

Black history has been intimately connected to black religion, which is ultimately rooted in the ethos of justice and freedom. But the African American religious community, the civil rights movement, and the larger black protest tradition were all highly varied in their political makeup, ranging along a continuum from cautious quietism to outright militancy. Gospel singers—deeply embedded in the black church and widely dispersed in the black community—were just as politically diverse. To be sure, black gospel, the black church, the black community: none of these handy formulations ever represented an undifferentiated monolith. Yet they all contained substantial elements of resistance. A living radical tradition has ebbed and flowed in black religion, coming to the fore when permitted or necessitated by historical conditions. Therefore if gospel music conveyed the core spiritual worldview of the black masses during the civil rights era, it must have contained its own radical currents.

Nevertheless, despite its ubiquitous presence and powerful influence in the civil rights movement, black gospel is considered an “apolitical” music form. Indeed, while some African American artists were becoming more outspoken as the movement progressed, gospel performers acquired a reputation for conspicuous silence on the pressing issues of race and social justice. This poses a paradox: If gospel was so obviously important to the movement, what accounts for this apparent quiescence of gospel music and gospel singers during the civil rights era? Were gospel artists really uninvolved—or unconcerned—with the mass movement that relied upon their music to function? The answers to these questions are not simple, but lie buried beneath the complex nature of black gospel culture.

Where dominant power structures repress open political opposition, cultural forms of protest are especially significant. Through culture, subordinated classes creatively express what is too dangerous to directly address in public. Thus domination and repression create cultures of resistance, and the richness

of these cultures corresponds to the severity of domination. Early in the twentieth century, during the height of the lynching era, W. E. B. Du Bois recognized that the music of black religion remained “the most original and beautiful expression of human life and longing yet born on American soil.” Du Bois described how black sacred music had sprung from the “African forests” to be “adapted, changed, and intensified by the tragic soul-life of the slave, until, under the stress of law and whip, it became the one true expression of a people’s sorrow, despair, and hope.”³

Du Bois emphasized the profound importance of the black church, insisting that “the study of Negro religion is not only a vital part of the history of the Negro in America, but no uninteresting part of American history.” He also understood that blacks were regarded as a “problem” in the United States, which caused them to see the world through a “veil” of racial distortion, and this had produced a painful identity conflict that he termed “double-consciousness.” In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois suggested that “[s]uch a double life, with double thoughts, double duties, and double social classes, must give rise to double words and double ideals, and tempt the mind to pretense or revolt, to hypocrisy or radicalism.” The need to reconcile rage and vindictiveness with an outer appearance of deference and fanatic escapism was cleverly articulated in African American sacred music. Black folk song, Du Bois argued, had been neglected, half-despised, and above all “persistently mistaken and misunderstood.”⁴

In his effusive praise for the “Sorrow Songs,” Du Bois called the old spirituals “the articulate message of the slave to the world,” which “tell in word and music of trouble and exile, of strife and hiding.” He deemed them “the music of an unhappy people, of the children of disappointment,” that “tell of death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world, of misty wanderings and hidden ways.” However, an underlying message of hope breathes through the misery of these songs, revealing “a faith in the ultimate justice of things.” Such a message, Du Bois noted, was “naturally veiled and half articulate.”⁵

Beneath the surface of “conventional theology and unmeaning rhapsody,” spirituals conveyed the restless, plaintive “soul-hunger” of a people in a way that was revealing for what they did *not* say at least

³ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Bantam Books, [1903] 1989), 134.

⁴ Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 136, 142, 178.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 179-80, 182.

as much as for what they *did* say. As Du Bois explained, “Over the inner thoughts of the slaves and their relations with one another the shadow of fear ever hung, so that we get but glimpses here and there, and also with them, eloquent omissions and silences.” He knew well that physical resistance against the white power structure was futile, political options were dwindling in the early years of Jim Crow, and economic advancements were only partially effective. Hence, as Du Bois acknowledged of the subaltern status so violently imposed on blacks, “Deception is the natural defense of the weak against the strong.”⁶

Anthropologist and political scientist James C. Scott has made the persuasive case that since dominated peoples cannot openly express their opposition, resistance is typically manifested in the veiled realm he calls the “hidden transcript”—the folk cultural discourse that diverts direct aggression into folktales, humor, fantasy, play, ritual, music and other forms. The spirituals were a consummate example of the hidden transcript. Among the recurring characters of these slave songs were the oppressive Pharaoh and God’s favored Israelites suffering in foreign bondage. Other favorites referenced biblical heroes like the warrior Joshua, or faithful underdogs such as Daniel in the lion’s den.

This musical protest code was in continual operation throughout the generations after slavery, and pervades black gospel imagery to this day. For not only did the prophetic allure of the spiritual tradition—the backbone of gospel—last long after Emancipation, but racism and repression were still prevalent enough by the mid-twentieth century to warrant sustained subterfuge. To avoid violent blowback, and to surreptitiously evade the objections and restrictions of wary record companies and radio stations, black gospel artists were compelled to continue couching their protest in what might sound like religious doggerel to enemies and outsiders. “And this may explain why lyrics that to white listeners seem abstract and corny are charged with specific, resonant meaning,” Heilbut remarked. “If the gospel world is dreadful, it merely reflects the inescapable conditions of black life.”⁷

Heilbut here makes a crucial point about black gospel music: like the spirituals, which similarly reflected the existential suffering of African Americans, gospel was charged with meanings that escaped

⁶ *Ibid.*, 143-4, 182-3, 186

⁷ Heilbut, *The Gospel Sound*, 262.

whites but resonated with blacks. For both poetic and strategic reasons, gospel protest was mostly masked in sacred symbolism.

The disguised protest of black gospel music was merely part of a much larger world of covert resistance at work in the black community. Together with the hidden transcript expressed through culture, everyday forms of submerged resistance and survival—thrift, footdragging, property destruction—constitute what Scott calls “infrapolitics.” As long as we confine our conception of “the political” to public acts and pronouncements, we are forced to assume that subordinate groups lack any political life other than the occasional explosion of frustrated violence. To only consider openly declared activity “is to miss the immense political terrain that lies between quiescence and revolt and that, for better or worse, is the political environment of subject classes.” It is, Scott rightly says, “to focus on the visible coastline of politics and miss the continent that lies beyond.” That vast continent of infrapolitics is, Scott asserts, “real politics.” Armies, revolutions, property rights, fiscal crises, labor issues, taxes—all could hinge upon its dynamic impact. “Resistant subcultures of dignity” are created and nurtured there, counterhegemonic discourse is elaborated, oblique aggression threatens to become open defiance, and “millennial dreams”—such as those common to black gospel culture—threaten to become revolutionary politics.⁸

“From this vantage point infrapolitics may be thought of as the elementary—in the sense of foundational—form of politics,” Scott continues. “It is the building block for the more elaborate institutionalized political action that could not exist without it. Under the conditions of tyranny and persecution in which most historical subjects live, it *is* political life.” Indeed, as he suggestively asks, “How . . . could we understand the open break represented by the civil rights movement or the black power movement in the 1960s without understanding the offstage discourse among black students, clergymen, and their parishioners?”⁹ One only need consider the striking prevalence of black gospel music within the movement to get a sense of its infrapolitical significance to the postwar freedom struggle.

⁸ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990), 199-201.

⁹ Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 199, 201.

In his essay on black working-class opposition in the Jim Crow South, historian Robin D. G. Kelley adheres to Scott's concept in describing the "daily confrontations, evasive actions, and stifled thoughts that often inform organized political movements."

I am not suggesting that the realm of infrapolitics is any more or less important or effective than what we traditionally consider politics. Instead, I want to suggest that the political history of oppressed people cannot be understood *without* reference to infrapolitics, for these daily acts have a cumulative effect on power relations. . . . The policies, strategies, or symbolic representations of those in power—what Scott calls the "official" or "public" transcript—cannot be understood without examining the infrapolitics of oppressed groups.

For his part, Kelley is "convinced that the realm of infrapolitics—from everyday resistance at work and in public spaces to the elusive hidden transcripts recorded in working-class discourses and cultures—holds rich insights into twentieth-century black political struggle."¹⁰

African American sacred music was endemic to the long black freedom struggle, particularly during the "classical" Southern movement of the mid-fifties to mid-sixties. Local gospel communities tied churches, fans, and other communities together, while the hidden transcript of black gospel suffused into the marrow of everyday infrapolitical life. "Grass-roots black community organizations such as mutual benefit societies, church groups, and gospel quartets were crucial to black people's survival," Kelley has found. "Through them, African Americans created and sustained bonds of community, mutual support networks, and a collectivist ethos that shaped black working political struggle."¹¹

Whatever their location, professional status, or level of popularity—from commercial fame in the urban North to amateur obscurity in the rural South—African American gospel artists were inseparable from the organic church culture of black communities. Hardly an enthusiastic supporter of contemporary black religion, sociologist E. Franklin Frazier perceived that gospel singers "represent or symbolize the attempt of the Negro to utilize his religious heritage in order to come to terms with changes in his own institutions as well as the problems of the world of which he is a part." Frazier recognized this "important fact" as the movement was cresting in the early 1960s. "[A]lthough the Gospel Singers have gone outside

¹⁰ Robin D. G. Kelley, "'We Are Not What We Seem': Rethinking Black Working-Class Politics in the Jim Crow South," *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 80, No. 1 (Jun., 1993), 77-8, 112.

¹¹ Kelley, "We Are Not What We Seem," 110.

the church for a congenial form of religious expression,” he noted, “they nevertheless remain in the church and are a part of the church.” Despite the music’s increased commercialization and crossover success, he understood that gospel singers “do not represent a complete break with the religious traditions of the Negro.” Rather, Frazier saw that these performers symbolized blacks’ utilization of their sacred traditions to deal with the changes and problems affecting African Americans.¹²

As for the activist youths who had been doing just that in recent years, Frazier was equally perceptive. “As young Negro students go forth singing Spirituals or the Gospel hymns when they engage in sit-down strikes or sing their Gospel songs in response to violence, they are behaving in accordance with the religious heritage of the Negro,” Frazier wrote. “In their revolt against racial discrimination they must fall back upon the only vital social heritage that has meaning for them and that . . . is the religious heritage represented by the Spirituals which are becoming secularized.”¹³ Reverend Walker, a songleader in his own right, agreed that the freedom songs “were not new, just revamped, and the youngsters and the oldsters of the movement had reclaimed them through an oral tradition of music that bridged the generation gap.” Walker similarly alluded to the “secularization” of black sacred music: the expanding commercialization of gospel, its increasing cross-fertilization with secular forms, and most significantly, its remarkable impact upon the larger music world.¹⁴

As a leading participant in local struggles across the South for nearly a decade, and particularly as chief architect of the 1963 Birmingham campaign, Walker could offer credible and convincing testimony that “there would have been very little ‘movement’ without the music of the Black religious tradition.”¹⁵ Gospel music was indeed playing a major role in the watershed Birmingham movement while Frazier’s *The Negro Church in America* went to press. The extraordinary case of Birmingham holds intriguing implications. This racially volatile industrial city was both a segregationist stronghold and a black gospel hotbed. Was it a *coincidence* that this most spectacular of “movement centers” just happened to be home

¹² E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (bound with *The Black Church Since Frazier* by C. Eric Lincoln) (New York: Schocken Books, [1963] 1974), 79.

¹³ Frazier, *The Negro Church in America*, 78-9.

¹⁴ Walker, “*Somebody’s Calling My Name*”, 154-5.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 183.

to one of the most dynamic and influential gospel communities? How gospel music impacted local movements is more fully examined in the following sections, but for now the main point is sufficient: gospel was closely related and deeply connected to the postwar freedom struggle.

This thesis is presented in three parts. Chapter One explores the political implications of black gospel music in the civil rights movement by looking at certain key issues: the grassroots nature of the gospel community; the infrapolitical essence of gospel and the paradox of its ostensible escapism; and the sociology of gospel culture as a tool in the movement itself. Chapter Two traces black sacred music in civil rights history, looking particularly at gospel in the postwar freedom struggle. Chapter Three features major black gospel figures and various gospel songs evincing civil rights consciousness.

Two kinds of recordings comprise the primary sources used in this thesis. One type is featured in Chapter Two, which covers the clearest gospel link to the civil rights movement: the freedom songs. When sung by local African American communities, mostly within their own churches, freedom songs naturally reflected the influence of indigenous gospel cultures as well as the immeasurable impact of commercial gospel records and radio. Gospel music shaped the sound and feel of local struggles, so actual songs performed by local activists and movement congregations during the peak civil rights years are highlighted. The included recordings illustrate this common “gospelization” of local movement cultures.

The second recording type is a main focus of Chapter Three: commercial gospel records, major label releases and independent obscurities alike. The examples neatly demonstrate the diversity of the black gospel genre—from male and female groups to soloists and singing preachers—and reveal the widespread existence of protest consciousness across its broad stylistic spectrum. “Political” records were more common on the local level, especially custom recordings without inhibitions of label or station affiliation. Quite a few of these records are really no more than gospel “covers” of well-known freedom songs—which were based on spirituals, the foundation of gospel. Not surprisingly, the movement anthem “We Shall Overcome” is the most frequent of these freedom song covers. Some songs explicitly comment upon significant events in movement lore, proving that at least some African American gospel artists were clearly not “disengaged” from the historic mass movement they did so much to inspire and embolden.

In elucidating the vital relationship between black gospel music and the civil rights movement, this thesis does not seek to argue that gospel was the most important thing contributing to the postwar freedom struggle. Obviously, a number of historical factors were critical to the advent or relative success of the movement: heightened pressures of the Cold War environment; the rising tide of anticolonialism; increasingly sympathetic media attention; and not least, the accumulated advances earned by generations of black men and women. But it is not an overstatement to say that black gospel did profoundly influence the movement, and fundamentally shape its most salient aspects. “The sit-ins soothed by hymns, the freedom marches powered by shouts, the ‘brother and sister’ fraternity of revolution: the gospel church gave us all these,” Heilbut averred. “But if gospel music is obliquely important to Middle America, it’s central to any study of the black ghetto.”¹⁶ Black gospel music is also central to any study of the civil rights movement—an undervalued concept that is the subject of the following pages.

¹⁶ Heilbut, *The Gospel Sound*, x.

CHAPTER ONE: BLACK GOSPEL POLITICS AND COMMUNITY ACTION

Culture is a vital human resource for resisting oppression. The sermons, prayers, and songs of African American church culture were key components of the civil rights movement. This chapter delves into the political implications of black gospel music by addressing three interrelated topics: the entrenchment of gospel in the black community; the complex meanings of gospel for black people; and the aptness of gospel music for encouraging and facilitating African American social action.

The Grassroots Gospel Community

The history of gospel music is deeply intertwined with the African American experience. Like its ragtime, jazz, and blues cousins, gospel was conceived during the bleak years between Reconstruction and World War I, the so-called “nadir of American race relations.” Its development reflected the massive social and cultural transformations of the era, as pioneering gospel composers and performers melded the old spirituals and hymns with new rhythms, harmonies, and verses to create a novel style of religious music that spoke to the black community’s need for faith and encouragement. Although “gospel” was used to label some black sacred music since the nineteenth century, the modern genre dates to the 1920s. By the late twenties the first “gospel blues” compositions had appeared, and by the early thirties the gospel chorus was becoming a mainstay of the black church. Incipient gospel culture was formed in the Great Depression, and by 1940 it was thoroughly entrenched in the African American community and found in all but the more elitist and conservative of black churches.

The male barbershop quartet tradition that gained national popularity in the 1890s was adapted by black singers to the spirituals. These groups were recorded at the dawn of the recording industry in the late nineteenth century and up through the 1920s. Gospel preachers, pianists, and congregations were also recorded to capitalize on the growing “race” market, especially before the Great Crash of 1929. Male quartets performed in both the staid “arranged” fashion and a rougher “folk” form, until supplanted by the bouncier “jubilee” style predominating by the 1930s. The post-World War II years saw the rise of the “hard” quartet sound, with its powerful vocal techniques and blues aesthetics.

Historically, male quartets have been the performers of black gospel music with the closest links to their communities. One historian of the form describes its widespread popularity before WWII: “Factory and construction workers, porters, and other employees sang in company or union-affiliated quartets, performing at picnics, parties, dances, and other business or community events. Family members formed quartets. Negro colleges continued to sponsor such groups, and Baptist and Methodist churches often formed male quartets to sing sacred music at worship services and evening programs.”¹⁷ By the early 1950s, professional and semi-professional quartets were found throughout the South and most urban areas with a significant African American population.¹⁸

Black gospel became an extraordinarily diverse music. Along with the quartets thrived a great variety of male and female groups, choirs, and soloists, with or without musical accompaniments—from pianos, organs, and tambourines to the raw distortions of amplified guitar-shredding preachers. Whatever the case, gospel was a singer’s art. “The supreme architects of the gospel moment are the great gospel singers,” wrote Anthony Heilbut. “With them, spirit and community are welded by art.”¹⁹ Here is a critical point, for it is in this welding of spirit and community that gospel music proved a particularly apt cultural tool for abetting a mass movement rooted in the black church.

Parallel to the postwar freedom struggle, the period from the 1940s to the 1960s is considered the “Golden Age of Gospel.” Gospel artists, gospel records, gospel radio, and the professional road called the “gospel highway”—all reached their pinnacle in the postwar era. “Facilitated by promotional strategies of the secular music industry, gospel music emerged as big business,” explains ethnomusicologist Portia K. Maultsby. During those greatest of mid-century years, black gospel artists sang in major concert halls, large theaters, auditoriums, and stadiums before audiences averaging twenty-five thousand or more throughout the United States and Europe. Supported by radio broadcasts and record sales, gospel became

¹⁷ Kerrill Rubman quoted in Portia K. Maultsby, “The Impact of Gospel Music on the Secular Music Industry,” in *We’ll Understand It Better By and By: Pioneering African American Gospel Composers*, ed. Bernice Johnson Reagon (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 21.

¹⁸ Kip Lornell, *“Happy in the Service of the Lord”: African-American Quartets in Memphis, Second Edition* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1995), 31.

¹⁹ Heilbut, *The Gospel Sound*, xviii.

deeply embedded in the fabric of the black community while it enriched the larger American culture. Maultsby describes how “gospel music slowly penetrated every artery of American life, linking the sacred and secular domains of the African American community, breathing life into new secular forms, and bringing flair and distinction to the American stage of entertainment.”²⁰

While full-time and semiprofessional gospel artists rode the wave of financial opportunity, untold thousands of amateur performers subsisted on freewill offerings or simply sang for nothing at religious events in churches or public venues. In an essay positing gospel’s “crystallization of the black aesthetic,” pioneering gospel music scholar and educator Pearl Williams-Jones referred to “the innumerable known and unknown choirs, congregations, quartets, and groups which proliferate throughout the country.” A gospel performer and daughter of a prominent minister, the late Dr. Williams-Jones noted in 1975 the remarkable fecundity and disseminated character of the music: “There are high aesthetic standards which are evident in the performances of many of the best known gospel singers, but these standards can also be observed in many obscure and unknown gospel churches throughout the U.S. where gospel talent often flourishes in abundance unrecognized by all except the knowledgeable few.”²¹ Three decades earlier, in their 1945 study of black Chicago, St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton reported that “[u]nknown to the upper class world, these lower-class [gospel] performers have a wide and appreciative audience and occasionally break through to the radio and receive national attention.”²²

Most black gospel scholarship has framed the music as a folk-derived yet highly urbanized, professionalized, and commercialized phenomenon of recordings, concerts, and radio airplay. But at least one folklorist has called attention to the wider world of grassroots gospel which “thrives in a number of less visible settings, where it is practiced by nonprofessional, non-commercially motivated performers.” In his study of a rural family act, Burt Feintuch argues that the commercial and noncommercial realms are

²⁰ Maultsby, “The Impact of Gospel Music on the Secular Music Industry,” 20-1; Teresa L. Reed, *The Holy Profane: Religion in Black Popular Music* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2003), 106-7.

²¹ Pearl Williams-Jones, “Afro-American Gospel Music: A Crystallization of the Black Aesthetic,” *Ethnomusicology*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Sep. 1975), 380-1.

²² St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1945), 627.

“separate but codependent” and “exist in a kind of symbiotic tension,” constantly exchanging material, styles, and personnel.²³

As products of a widespread gospel localism, the vast majority of acts did not have reputations extending much beyond their home region—or perhaps even beyond their own church. “Therein lies the difference between gospel and virtually every other form of music,” notes journalist and gospel researcher Alan Young. “Gospel still belongs to the community. It has national stars, big recording companies, and television and radio shows, but its foundation is still in thousands of churches throughout the United States, especially in the South.” Young reports that church “is a social as well as a religious occasion, and the church membership makes up a close-knit group within the larger community.”²⁴

Hence the nebulous concept “gospel community.” Often it refers to the general collective of all gospel music professionals, an “imagined community” of gospel singers, songwriters, and entrepreneurs. However, in the present thesis a “gospel community” denotes grassroots performers and fans in local churches and auditoriums. In this devoted community, gospel music is an organic part of the local cultural environment. Performers literally grew up singing in choirs and youth groups, and by the postwar era national conventions had been formed to organize this surplus of local gospel talent. The huge number of grassroots performers, many highly skilled if little known, have always replenished gospel’s deep reservoir and assured its progression. Based on research conducted among Southern gospel communities in the late twentieth century, Young concludes that black gospel music “continues to develop because it is not only still in touch with its community, but still belongs to it.”²⁵

By the civil rights period, virtually all black churches had a gospel choir, most had members in a gospel group, and as Young discovered, this “community-based nature of gospel also shows in the two-tier recording industry which operates in the genre.” The immense growth and spread of black gospel after WWII was greatly facilitated by the plethora of new independent record companies catering to the

²³ Burt Feintuch, “A Noncommercial Black Gospel Group in Context: We Live the Life We Sing About,” *Black Music Research Journal*, Vol. 1 (1980), 37, 41.

²⁴ Alan Young, *Woke Me Up This Morning: Black Gospel Singers and the Gospel Life* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), xxxv.

²⁵ Young, *Woke Me Up This Morning*, xxxv-xxxvi.

African American market. On top of the gospel field were the major acts signed to established labels offering national promotion. But underneath that first tier, tiny provincial labels abounded to exploit local talent pools. Many gospel records were cut by artists that were lesser known or unknown, other than by a small circle of friends, family, and church members. It was common for local performers to make out-of-pocket “vanity” recordings, where artists would hire a studio and pay to have records manufactured and packaged; artists then purchased copies which they would sell themselves at programs and through local outlets. Copies would go to radio stations, and it was possible to have a local hit from a self-financed record.²⁶

This “democratization” of record making is illustrated on two recent reissue compilations of obscure black gospel 45s produced by writer and collector Mike McGonigal. The first of the pair (2009) “attempts to address and collect more neglected sounds from [the post-WWII] era.” McGonigal “mashed together” several traditions, presenting “solo performances next to congregational recordings, hellfire sermons next to afterlife laments.” Tracks from major labels are followed by field recordings, though most of the records were originally released on regional independents. “Many of the artists only have one known release,” he notes. “[I]t was often a challenge to uncover even the slightest bit of information.” A typically slim entry reads: “This rocking number was taken from a 45 on the Dallas, TX-based Act’s Label.” Regarding the second set (2011), which concentrates more upon recordings “presented as commercial artifacts within the local gospel community,” McGonigal states that “[a]t least one-third of these records were self-released, paid for by a church congregation or the artists themselves. Others were on regional labels (typically run by one single producer) little known today outside of a small circle of collectors.”²⁷

Of course, American racial conditions provided the context within which black records were made and sold. Thus the story of their creation, distribution, and consumption, as one scholar suggests,

²⁶ *Ibid.*, xxxv.

²⁷ Notes to *Fire in My Bones: Raw Rare + Otherworldly African-American Gospel [1944-2007]*, Tompkins Square compact disc 2271, and *This May Be My Last Time Singing: Raw African-American Gospel on 45RPM [1957-1982]*, Tompkins Square compact disc 2639, 3.

“has much to tell historians about the African American community during years of great social upheaval and change.”²⁸ One of the most telling things is the assumed rarity, if not total absence, of known gospel records from the movement period with explicit civil rights themes. But we must tentatively say *assumed* rarity and *known* records because most of the black gospel music recorded during the postwar era has yet to be recovered and analyzed. Fortunately, organized efforts by dedicated scholars are already underway. As that process proceeds in earnest, more civil rights songs are in fact emerging, particularly from the B-sides of records by obscure artists on equally obscure labels.

Journalism professor and black gospel music historian Robert Darden oversees a preservation program begun in 2005 at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, called the Black Gospel Music Restoration Project (BGMRP), whose stated mission is to “identify, acquire, preserve, record and catalogue the most at-risk music from the black gospel music tradition.”²⁹ Alarming, so much of the music has not been saved for the digital age that it is quite literally disappearing: Darden estimates that seventy-five percent of the black gospel recorded between 1945 and 1975 has not been digitally transferred and could be gone forever once extant copies are lost or destroyed.³⁰

A 2011 Baylor press release titled “Civil Rights on the Flip Side” explained how the BGMRP had discovered among the over two thousand received items a number of records with songs that “address the subject of civil rights, the Vietnam War and other social issues.” As Darden reasonably speculates, this “tells us that the gospel community was much more involved in the civil rights movement than we previously thought.” The songs related to civil rights may have escaped notice, he suggests, simply because few scholars are studying gospel music’s impact on that issue.³¹ Indeed, most black gospel literature is nearly or completely silent on this matter.

²⁸ Guido van Rijn, “‘Climbing the Mountain Top’: African American Blues and Gospel Songs from the Civil Rights Years,” in *Media, Culture, and the Modern African American Freedom Struggle*, ed. Brian Ward (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001), 140.

²⁹ Baylor University Library, “Black Gospel Music Restoration Project,” <http://www.baylor.edu/lib/gospel/>.

³⁰ Robert Darden, “Gospel’s Got the Blues,” *NYTimes.com*, February 15, 2005, http://www.nytimes.com/2005/02/15/opinion/15darden.html?_r=2.

³¹ Baylor University Media Communications, “Civil Rights on the Flip Side,” January 24, 2011, <http://www.baylor.edu/mediacommunications/news.php?action=story&story=87393>.

By extrapolation, if approximately three-quarters of all postwar gospel recordings are still undocumented, it stands to reason that many more civil rights records have existed and may emerge in the future. (Not to mention the unfortunate reality that in coming years so much more will likely meet an undignified demise in landfills, dumpsters, and abandoned properties around the country.) Nonetheless such records did exist, as black gospel researchers are beginning to show, though exhuming them from oblivion will require the kind of substantial, long-range efforts undertaken by the BGMRP—in addition to the numerically few but obsessively dedicated individual collector-historians doing most of the work.

But notwithstanding the somewhat promising outlook on future discoveries, it remains that explicit movement records were never more than a minor phenomenon. On a mainstream retrospective like the Time-Life collection deemed “Music of the Civil Rights Movement,” less than ten of the fifty-eight tracks are gospel records. More esoteric sources reinforce this fact, as just a single “topical song” from both McGonigal gospel compilations is found among the 152 rarities spanning over six decades. When the times ripened for protest and the African American church assumed its leadership of the black freedom struggle, one would expect to have heard more gospel recordings about civil rights and other sociopolitical themes. But for the most part, this was not the case.

This certainly does not mean that gospel artists were not involved in other significant ways, like performing at mass meetings, volunteering for movement work, or just making financial donations. As shown in Chapter Three, some of the greatest gospel figures were outspoken or even politically active. But for most members of the gospel community *open* resistance was largely avoided, and for good reason. After WWII gospel singers were becoming increasingly professionalized entertainers concerned with making a viable living, and professional performers of all (or no) political persuasions had to earn money and support their families.

Despite the relative anonymity of most local singers, several regional “stars” of the 1930s—who toured while maintaining full-time jobs—were by the 1940s touring the country as full-time professional artists. For professionals, remuneration through live appearances, recording contracts, and radio sponsorships was severely jeopardized by any sign of racial militancy; for semiprofessionals or amateurs,

holding down jobs and eking out a marginal existence in Southern communities, drawing the ire of local racists was a life-or-death matter. Thus black gospel records, not surprisingly, revealed little evidence of plainspoken “protest” consciousness.

By the 1950s gospel music had not only saturated the African American community, but had gained the attention of the larger white world as well. Therefore it is not surprising that most black gospel artists eschewed material that could threaten their livelihoods, if not their very lives. In the face of economic reprisals or worse, most gospel singers and songwriters—not to mention record companies and radio stations—understandably avoided overt support for civil rights concerns regardless of personal political leanings. Until the movement had begun effecting tangible social transformation in the latter 1960s, particularly in the reactionary and recalcitrant South, probable physical dangers faced the outspoken and ruthless economic violence confronted the defiant. Is it any wonder, then, that gospel music did not commonly express blatant sociopolitical protest?

The well-substantiated fears of such reprisals kept most people in all walks of African American life—including the less financially vulnerable ministers—from becoming openly involved with the movement. To be sure, in many parts of the South formidable groups like the White Citizens’ Council were basically indistinguishable from the local, county, and even state government authorities. Just as a small minority of preachers and laypeople actively participated in rallies, marches, or civil rights organizations, it is also unreasonable to expect that professional entertainers of any kind would have done so. In fact, their higher public visibility and greater dependence on public approval arguably made them *more* reticent to instigate negative public reaction than most members of the black community. Especially if they wanted to make commercial recordings, get on radio, and secure bookings, black gospel artists were generally unable to employ frank protest language in their songs.

Southern record labels were naturally loathe to endanger their business, and even Northern or Western labels could ill-afford to risk their important Southern market by offending the region’s racist power brokers. Dubbed “The World’s Greatest Gospel Singer” by industry giant Columbia Records, Mahalia Jackson first recorded for the major Decca label in 1937, and although her initial release sold

moderately outside her home base of Chicago, it did well in the Deep South.³² Later, during the golden age 1950s, despite triumphal Carnegie Hall performances and European tours, Jackson was told her popular local CBS radio and television shows had no chance for national network pick-up because sponsors feared alienating the white South. As an enthusiastic young Elvis Presley proved, Southern whites could and did tune into black-oriented radio just as easily as blacks. Station owners and managers considered the grave reality that hostile ears were among the thousands of listeners, primed to react and attack at the slightest hint of racial criticism. Indeed, radio transmitters were sabotaged, lines were cut, and crosses were burned to chasten or intimidate stations perceived as too friendly to the movement. Aside from the Ku Klux Klan and its ilk, nervous advertisers and bureaucrats had to be placated. In short, civil rights sympathy was simply bad for business, big or small.

It is highly probable that nonprofessional, noncommercial gospel performers, ensconced in their tight, local settings, were freer than bigger, more visible artists to confront controversial themes. And needless to say, self-pressed records were not subject to the same stringent censorship as those in the higher-stakes commercial sphere. Without the strictures imposed upon gospel artists with larger exposure, it makes sense that it would have been these more obscure performers with little or no label affiliation who cut more explicit “protest” or “message” songs.

Obviously, little-known local singers were not somehow more militant than gospel’s commercial elite. Since the personal and creative barriers between the major artists and grassroots gospel communities have been so permeable, and considering the severe reluctance of labels, stations, and sponsors to touch the toxic race issue, it can be safely assumed that more explicit material would have been recorded if allowed the relative autonomy of local vanity pressings. Clearly, much more collecting, compiling, and analyzing is necessary. However, it cannot be overemphasized that the sole concentration upon *overt* protest still fails to shed enough light on how gospel music really conveyed African American resistance to racism and injustice. That complex issue is addressed in the next section of this chapter.

³² Robert Darden, *People Get Ready!: A New History of Black Gospel Music* (New York and London: Continuum, 2004), 215.

The Gospel Paradox of Otherworldly Politics

Black gospel has an entrenched reputation for conservatism and escapism, which supposedly molds its “apolitical” outlook. A number of prominent scholars support this view, and even the most sympathetic critics have tended to agree. By text alone, gospel music overwhelmingly confirms that sweeping generalization. But insofar as gospel strongly reflects the black church from which it springs, and the church was the bedrock foundation of the civil rights movement, the “paradox” of such a music so powerfully impacting the postwar freedom struggle must be looked into more closely.

The “invisible institution” of the underground slave church succored and strengthened the black masses during the most trying times imaginable. From secret night meetings to prophetic slave preachers leading bloody revolts, the very existence of an Afro-Christian church was radically subversive. Certainly it held no rival for the dependence and loyalty of blacks for many years.

But from the Civil War to the civil rights movement, the African American population became increasingly disseminated, differentiated, and secularized. With this massive spreading and changing the black church atomized into myriad denominations, sects, and cults, and by the hardest years of the Depression it had effectively “deradicalized.” Black churches stayed involved in local urban politics, primarily in the North, but poor and poorly educated rural migrants combined with devastating economic conditions to push many churches into a conservative political stance.

As C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya explain, the “deradicalization thesis” is based on sociological studies by Benjamin Mays and Joseph Nicholson (1933), Gunnar Myrdal (1944), St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton (1945), and E. Franklin Frazier (1963), “which detected a strong conservative strain among black clergy and churches, a withdrawal from political and social involvement in their communities, and a pronounced tendency towards assimilation into mainstream white culture, accompanied by a denial of black heritage and black nationalism.”³³ Frazier blamed the “petty tyrants” and “ignorant” preachers who, backed by the white community, had mis-educated blacks in democratic

³³ C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1990), 209.

processes, concluding that “the Negro church and Negro religion have cast a shadow over the entire intellectual life of Negroes and have been responsible for the so-called backwardness of American Negroes.”³⁴

Accordingly, it is reasoned that twentieth-century gospel lost the revolutionary seditiousness of the early black church and retreated into brimstone moralism and passive ecstasy. As a whole, gospel artists have been considered notably weak on political grounds. During the black power era, Heilbut observed that gospel singers “are still accused of being Uncle Toms—alas, with some cause.”

For years, New York amateurs participated in a contest sponsored by Aunt Jemima Cake Flour. A cynic can't improve on the Aunt Jemima Gospel Contest. More to the point, the dismal track record of gospel preachers on most community issues is legendary. Even now, their attempts to accommodate the current politics can prove disastrous.

He went on to describe a famous “St. Louis preacher-singer” who discusses civil rights on his television program “in noncommittal statements . . . guaranteed to offend nobody.” Crowds might come for “civil rights” or “psychology” or “police brutality,” insisted this performer, but only Jesus keeps them in. Heilbut complained that with such “mangled” rhetoric, “gospel’s image is bound to suffer.” He then cited the sermonette of another gospel preacher about a mother’s prayer that brings her “sloppy, implicitly Black Panther” son back to Jesus and a razor. “Again,” bemoaned Heilbut, “the gospel lover is embarrassed.”³⁵

Clearly no gospel lover himself, theologian Joseph R. Washington called gospel “the most degenerate form of Negro religion.” At the height of the civil rights movement in 1964, Washington sharply criticized what he felt were the music’s political irrelevancy and theological weakening of the spirituals. “Gospel music is the creation of a disengaged people,” he argued. “Shorn from the roots of the folk religion, gospel music has turned the freedom theme in Negro spirituals into licentiousness. The African rhythm detracts from the almost unintelligible ‘sacred’ texts.” Making note of its “commonplace” existence, Washington dismissed the mass gospel phenomenon as nothing but “sheer entertainment by commercial opportunists.” He especially reproached ministers “who urge their people to seek their

³⁴ Frazier, *The Negro Church in America*, 90.

³⁵ Heilbut, *The Gospel Sound*, 296-7.

amusement in gospel music and the hordes of singers who profit from it and lead the masses down the road of religious frenzy and escapism.”³⁶ Thus for Washington and like-minded critics, the proud protest tradition of the old spirituals had been deradicalized by the crass commercialism, exhibitionism, and emotionalism of modern black gospel.

Lincoln and Mamiya offer the standard opinion that gospel theology has consistently been in the “evangelical tradition,” and hence “there can be a musical retreat from what is happening in the black community rather than a response to it.”³⁷ One of the leading scholars of black sacred music has even posited that “the entire history of gospel music is an anticultural *movement*”—meaning a rejection of the secular world that was so immoral and inhospitable to God-fearing blacks. Jon Michael Spencer argues that gospel “is the creation of a people who exist amid the absurdity of American race conventions and thus is a music that constantly raises questions about the relationship of faith and culture or society.” The single stream of thought running through its discourse is the notion that Jesus Christ is “Everything” and the “Ultimate Alternative” to a world that is “essentially nothing, that is, no friend, offering no protection, and conditioned by captivity.” Spencer concludes that if the “gospel of gospel” is problematic, it is because performers and audience take this alternative absolutism too seriously.³⁸ And presumably, according to this logic, they neglect attention to real-world conditions and forfeit responsibility for community advancement.

“The overriding thrust of the gospel songs was otherworldly,” wrote eminent cultural historian Lawrence W. Levine. Certainly the “religion of the gospel songs . . . recognized and discussed the troubles, sorrows, and burdens of everyday existence but its immediate solutions tended to be a mixture of Christian faith and one variety or another of positive thinking.”³⁹ In other words, the general worldview of

³⁶ Washington’s 1964 book *Black Religion* quoted in Spencer, *Protest and Praise*, 200; and Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 198.

³⁷ Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, 376.

³⁸ See “Christ against Culture: Anticulturalism in the Gospel of Gospel,” Chapter 9 in Jon Michael Spencer, *Protest and Praise: Sacred Music of Black Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 199-223.

³⁹ Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 175-6.

black gospel culture has been fundamentally “detached from reality”—more inclined toward seeking relief in the afterlife than engaging in real-life struggle.

These unflattering analyses from respected scholars have obviously lent support to the traditional “opiate” view of religion generally and black gospel music in particular. Yet within his seeming dismissal of gospel on a political-action level, Levine identifies its instrumental function in African American lives. Put another way: strong religious faith and positive consciousness, the primary traits of black gospel music, were precisely what gave the classical Southern movement its unique historical impact. “Marx was only half right,” wrote C. Eric Lincoln, “religion may be the opiate of the people, but religion is also a combustible that has been known on no few occasions to make the most significant changes in the course of human history.”⁴⁰

Spencer rightly suggests that a “serious study of the civil rights era is contingent upon its freedom songs, just as a scholarly treatment of the slave era is incomplete without an in-depth investigation into the meaning of the spirituals.” The implication is that a special historical relationship exists between the original freedom songs of slavery and those of the civil rights movement, which explains the particular suitability of adapting old spirituals to modern protest. But in criticizing the conspicuous absence of freedom songs from black histories and hymnals, Spencer complains that only “lukewarm gospel songs allow the desired dissociation from historical reality embodied in the freedom songs.”⁴¹

Others have remarked how theological emphases evolved in the violent transition to life after slavery, marking a shift from the earthly emancipation of spirituals to the heavenly redemption of gospel. Levine notes that Jesus rather than the Hebrew Children dominated gospel songs, and points out the differences between the “warrior Jesus of the spirituals” and the “benevolent spirit” promising reward in the hereafter. “The focus was on heaven,” says Levine, “and in the gospel songs, unlike the spirituals, the concept of heaven remained firmly in the future, largely distinct from Man’s present situation.”⁴²

⁴⁰ C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Church Since Frazier* (bound with *The Negro Church in America* [1963] by E. Franklin Frazier) (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), 135.

⁴¹ Spencer, *Protest and Praise*, 105.

⁴² Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 175-6.

By these measures gospel music is considered to have been less important to the black freedom struggle, and less relevant to its participants, than songs known to slaves over a century earlier. But such views misconstrue gospel history by wrongly severing it from the foundational legacy of the spirituals. Not only do they inaccurately confine gospel to a narrow stylistic range of professionalized entertainment, but they misrepresent black sacred musical progress by ossifying the spiritual form in an antebellum time capsule, effectively isolated from all that followed.

Such interpretive errors resemble those committed by Old Left propagandists who idealized spirituals as some archetypical, ideologically “pure” specimen of proletarian folk culture. Left-wing political ideologues, even with the best intentions, were so keen to promote traditional black sacred songs as the quintessential protest music that they overlooked or ignored the thriving musical traditions of contemporary churches, from big cities to backwoods, where spirituals, hymns, and gospel songs were all familiar to black congregations still struggling in America.

While much of the new gospel repertoire consisted of adapted hymns and original blues-infused compositions, spirituals always persisted in large proportion and reinterpreted versions were generously recorded by all manner of gospel artists. Far too many gospel songs incorporated phrases and images from their predecessors to make hard distinctions practical or even possible—for the oral legacy of the spirituals was omnipresent in gospel music. During the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, as the spiritual tradition passed into the gospel era and old songs found new life in novel forms, the African American community was still the product of a predominantly oral culture, despite herculean efforts towards literacy and education.

There has always been an indelible oppositional aspect to African American oral culture, from trickster folktales to gangsta rap fantasies, but somehow gospel music has been made an exception to this vital oppositional tradition. This is the “paradox” of gospel’s connection to the civil rights movement. But if we recall the special infrapolitical significance of subaltern folk cultures, and we consider the rich hidden transcript embedded in the orally-transmitted sacred song tradition, we can hardly suppose that the veiled protest of previous generations simply evaporated from black gospel discourse.

“That African and Afro-American music is loaded with mask and symbol cannot be denied,” asserted John Lovell, Jr., whose magnum opus culminated decades of research on the spirituals. “If the interpreter of the spiritual that grew up in America overlooks the mask and symbol, he is displaying remarkable ignorance and indulging in inexcusable inaccuracy.”⁴³ To neglect these same subversive elements in gospel music is to commit essentially the same gross error. Broadening the narrow definitions of protest and resistance into the more elusive realm of deflective symbolism brings us much closer to grasping how black gospel related to the African American freedom struggle.

Black sacred music has always been polysemic in nature: that is, imbued with multiple meanings. It has long been known that antebellum spirituals contained messages of freedom and resistance coded in Afro-Christian symbolism. Draped in scriptural imagery and sung by people well versed in their seditious meaning, spirituals referred to earthly as well as heavenly release from hellish oppression. The slaves that cloaked songs of escape and antiauthoritarianism in biblical allegory, if only from sheer self-preservation, were usually considered by whites as too fatalistically obsessed with the afterlife to worry about freedom in the present one. Former slave Frederick Douglass recalled the singing of semi-improvised songs that “were jargon to others, but full of meaning for themselves.”⁴⁴ Only later were the meanings of many stock spiritual references discovered. Sixteen years after the Thirteenth Amendment legally abolished slavery, Douglass revealed that a “keen observer” might have detected “something more than a hope of reaching heaven” in slaves’ repeated singing of being “bound for the land of Canaan.” Douglass, who escaped at twenty, unequivocally claimed that for his comrades in bondage “the North was our Canaan.”⁴⁵

The infrapolitical resonance of “Canaan” and so many other symbolic touchstones were retained in black gospel’s inherited oral culture. Gospel absorbed the spirituals into its broad corpus, and was fully invested with their covert codes of resistance. Granting that the dynamic possibilities of intent and reception are infinite, it is just not credible to maintain that black gospel music discontinued the

⁴³ John Lovell, Jr., *Black Song: The Forge and the Flame (The Story of How the Afro-American Spiritual Was Hammered Out)* (New York: Paragon House Publishers, 1972), 46.

⁴⁴ Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York: Dover, [1855] 1969), 98-9.

⁴⁵ Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, [1881] 1983), 157.

longstanding practice of employing hidden transcripts. If the exploitative “Satan” of slave songs often implicitly translated to “white man,” surely this was true for twentieth-century gospel. Though *de jure* slavery had passed away, the *de facto* dangers of racism were still a menace to African Americans. Lynching, racial terror, and white mob violence reached an historical apex during gospel’s earliest period in the first decades of the century. At least in the South, these remained serious threats well into the civil rights years. The gospel highway was especially hazardous; in addition to the customary problems of finding services and accommodations, black performers travelling by automobile regularly encountered the capricious bullying of law enforcement and local thugs.

Levine acknowledges “a number of important points of continuity in the consciousness of the gospel songs and the spirituals”—namely, the immediate, intimate, living presence of God, and messages of hope and affirmation.⁴⁶ The dominant themes of gospel stress the same Christian principles guiding the civil rights movement: righteousness, perseverance, and faith in an ultimately just and Almighty God. But the core concept of both the spirituals and their gospel successors is *freedom*, not only from the worldly sins afflicting the black community but also from the earthly problems oppressing it. In gospel’s defense Heilbut declaimed that it “is simply the only music sung by people in terrible conditions *about* those conditions, in an attempt to get out of them.” Heilbut, who has known many gospel singers, suggested that all of them, from conservatives to progressives, were “filled with black anger.” If they exhibited no special loyalty to vanguard radicalism, Heilbut reasoned, neither did the black masses.⁴⁷

Too many critics have assumed that the total dependence upon Jesus in gospel theology is a clear indication of the music’s overwhelmingly otherworldly outlook. It is true that gospel presents Christ as the answer to all the many problems of black existence. However, in analyzing hundreds of gospel lyrics, Louis-Charles Harvey found three general categories under which Jesus most often appears: Friend, Protector, and Liberator. “Accepting Jesus’s protection did not mean passivity,” emphasizes Harvey. “[R]ather, it meant participation, that is walking with Jesus in the storms of life.” Harvey proposes that

⁴⁶ Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 175-6.

⁴⁷ Heilbut, *The Gospel Sound*, 297-8.

gospel music writers “are clear that Jesus’s activity as liberator applies to both the physical and spiritual liberation of the individual Christian.” Even though sin is considered the major form of bondage, social and economic freedoms have not been neglected by black gospel writers. Harvey illustrates this point with a 1956 gospel composition, incidentally adopted by the seminal Montgomery boycott movement of the same year: James Cleveland’s “Soldiers in the Army.” Active participation in the battles of life is the main theme with lines like “*We’ve got to fight although / We have to cry / We’ve got to hold up the blood-stained banner / We got to hold it up until we die.*”⁴⁸

But even proponents of the “otherworldly” argument readily concede that it is wrong to isolate gospel texts from the performative context. Gospel is primarily a performance art, so it is up to the singers to dramatize lyrics and invest them with significance for the audience—whose emotional connection and reciprocated enthusiasm are vitally important to the total gospel experience. “Gospel songs, of course, no less than the spirituals that preceded them, were more than collections of verbalized ideas and attitudes,” Levine noted in his popular study *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*. “As important as the lyrics were, to leave our discussion there without some consideration of the nature of the music and the mode of performance would lose the essence and distort the experience of gospel song.”⁴⁹

All of which leads to the heart of this thesis: What is the gospel experience, and how did it inform the black freedom struggle? The gospel experience “is almost ritualistic in its sustained drama and spiritual intensity,” explains Pearl Williams-Jones. “People are possessed and overcome in this state of high religious ecstasy.”⁵⁰ As Ray Pratt suggests in his book on African American musical resistance, “There is a prefigurative dimension to the gospel experience that is more than ecstatic social psychology. In its creation of a new, free space in a world of trouble, it is also political.”⁵¹ In fact, the feeling of community fostered by this elevated spiritual moment *is* the message of gospel music.

⁴⁸ Louis-Charles Harvey, “Black Gospel Music and Black Theology,” *Journal of Religious Thought*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (Fall-Winter 1986-1987), 27-36.

⁴⁹ Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 177.

⁵⁰ Williams-Jones, “Afro-American Gospel Music: A Crystallization of the Black Aesthetic,” 381.

⁵¹ Ray Pratt, *Rhythm and Resistance: Explorations in the Political Uses of Popular Music* (New York: Praeger, 1990), 66.

As noted in the introduction, Robin D. G. Kelley mentions gospel quartets as significant bearers of infrapolitical culture in African American communities during the Jim Crow era. Again, following the elite national acts were hundreds of community-based quartets, many of the nonprofessional variety. Though relatively little research has been conducted on the subject, scholars agree that gospel music and especially quartet performances have been “focal points for the social interaction and shared values that help solidify the church community.” Closely resembling the structure and atmosphere of black church services, gospel music programs are highly ritualized events promoting group identity and solidarity. Moreover, programs are cross-denominational events welcoming all into the gospel community. There is a distinctly democratic tone to a gospel program, reflecting the collective nature of African American sacred ritual. The fact that they are structured to allow several groups to sing for equal time segments reinforces the communal spirit of the event. Once a performance is underway, singers will often leave the stage area and move into the aisles to interact more intimately with the audience, thus blurring the distinction between performers and spectators.⁵²

Notwithstanding their obvious entertainment function, gospel programs are primarily intended for the purposes of praise. And the ultimate objective of this praise is the inducement of the Holy Spirit: the moment of ritualistic transcendence accompanied by extraordinary feelings of spiritual joy, identified as “trance” or “possession” by ethnographers. As the performance moves toward the transcendent gospel experience, ritual participants rejoice as they approach a state of “spontaneous communitas.” As conceived by anthropologist Victor Turner, and as defined by quartet scholar Ray Allen, the concept of communitas refers to “a ritualized experience of intense human interrelatedness and lack of social hierarchy” that occurs during many rites of passage, commonly associated with mystical powers believed to be sent by deities or spiritual ancestors.⁵³

Allen argues that the notion of communitas “accurately characterizes the heightened moments of gospel quartet performances when hierarchy disintegrates; singers and congregation members spiritually

⁵² Ray Allen, *Singing in the Spirit: African-American Sacred Quartets in New York City* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press: 1991), 19, 82, 90-1.

⁵³ Allen, *Singing in the Spirit*

unite to summon the Holy Spirit into their presence.” Communal ecstasy and shouts of praise are the ideal results. “The flexible, democratic organization of the gospel program unquestionably facilitates this process,” Allen explains, “but so does the patterning of individual quartet performances.”⁵⁴

While any portion of a gospel program, from the opening devotional prayers to the traditional congregational hymns, may potentially bring down the Holy Spirit, typically this is accomplished through the heightened psycho-emotional level of the actual gospel performance. “During the gospel program, the spoken, chanted, and sung words communicate referential information needed for comprehending the nature of humanity and the universe,” reports Allen. “But equally important, the highly stylized manner in which the message is delivered stirs the emotional temperament of the worshippers to a point where they actually feel, and possibly experience (if the Spirit descends), the truth of those teachings.”⁵⁵ In effect, this is the gospel experience, which played an incalculably important role in galvanizing the African American masses throughout the civil rights movement.

Such a physically, emotionally, and psychologically penetrating musical experience must have deep roots in the cultural past, and indeed it does. Black music scholar Samuel A. Floyd accurately states that the aim of African music has always been “to translate the experiences of life and of the spiritual world into sound, enhancing and celebrating life.”⁵⁶ The main focus of West African culture is religion, and the most pronounced New World “Africanisms” have likewise been found in the religious sphere. Hence a discernible “African ethos,” embodied in black religious culture, survived the long and traumatic slave experience. “Because independent forms of activity were discouraged or even banned,” Pratt explains, “slaves engaged in unique forms of oppositional creativity through religion and music.”⁵⁷

Despite the destruction of families, languages, and entire ways of life, an inextinguishable African ethos has remained a vital element of black religious culture across the transatlantic diaspora. Under the unique historical circumstances of North America, this cultural legacy was distilled into a

⁵⁴ Allen, *Singing in the Spirit*, 92-3.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁵⁶ Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 32.

⁵⁷ Pratt, *Rhythm and Resistance*, 56.

recognizable aesthetic, most hardily preserved in the musical traditions of the independent black church. From the “brush arbor” meetings of rural slavery to the “storefront” churches of urban ghettos, through dramatic transformations and generations of repression, this tenaciously resilient aesthetic remained heavily concentrated in the sacred singing tradition that vigorously rejected white cultural standards.

This is precisely the same “black aesthetic” that was “crystallized” in the art of black gospel music performance. “If a basic theoretical concept of a black aesthetic can be drawn from the history of the black experience in America,” contends Williams-Jones, “the crystallization of this concept is embodied in Afro-American gospel music.” Many aspects of black American culture, including folktales and speech patterns, reveal connecting links to Africa in varying degrees. However, as Williams-Jones argues, black gospel music “retains the most noticeable African-derived aesthetic features of all.” A synthesis of West African and African American music, dance, poetry and drama, gospel has “distilled the aesthetic essence of the black arts into a unified whole.”⁵⁸

In radical contradistinction to white bourgeois culture, the “otherworldly” aspects of ecstatic gospel performance art were above all declarations of black pride and cultural power. Ideologically, gospel has affirmed the value of blackness itself. In developing their own church institutions and sacred music styles that recognized the historical viability and dynamism of black culture, African Americans have effectually rejected the rites, beliefs, and values of white society—and particularly white church culture. Ethnomusicologist Mellonee V. Burnim explains how gospel ideology “was a continual reinforcement of Black cultural traditions, which represented the very antithesis of those traditions associated with the larger society.”⁵⁹

By its nature opposed to dominant white notions of respectability and pregnant with messages of freedom, the gospel experience tapped deep into the black liberation tradition to shape the sound and feel of the civil rights crusade. This does not mean that black gospel was overt protest music. Nor does it deny

⁵⁸ Williams-Jones, “Afro-American Gospel Music: A Crystallization of the Black Aesthetic,” 373-8.

⁵⁹ Mellonee V. Burnim, “The Black Gospel Music Tradition: A Complex of Ideology, Aesthetic, and Behavior,” in *More Than Dancing: Essays on Afro-American Music and Musicians*, ed. Irene V. Jackson (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1985), 147, 153.

that gospel music conservatives, accommodationists, and apolitical millenarians existed in large numbers. Obviously, not all gospel artists were closet radicals or secret subversives. However, up to the eve of the Montgomery bus boycott, certainly all members of the black gospel community—irrespective of class, education, or political orientation—held a common stake in transforming the racist and discriminatory state of American society, North and South. If both pragmatic business considerations and potential violence predictably suppressed political activism, would not the legacy of infrapolitical resistance have persisted, unbroken, from the original antebellum “freedom songs” into the golden age of postwar gospel?

Reverend Walker fittingly defined gospel as “an individual expression of a collective predicament within a religious context.”⁶⁰ That is to say: gospel, the modernized sacred music of black Americans, was just as much about current worries and troubles as the “Sorrow Songs” of slavery honored by Du Bois. After civil rights legislation had been passed and the movement had waned, the problems of many black communities remained or worsened; yet that sacred songs continued to matter to the African American masses revealed much about the entrenched structural inequality of American social, political, and economic conditions. “For the gospel poor,” Heilbut remarked in the early seventies, “things have scarcely changed.”⁶¹

That black church music mattered to the African American population years after the movement, as well as years before it, is really the whole answer to the paradox of “otherworldly politics.” The hidden transcript’s masked expressive capacities and the transcendent community spirit invoked by the gospel experience were exactly what made this music the ideal cultural tool for mobilizing black people.

Gospel Music as Cultural Tool of Resistance

Theories regarding the effects of culture on social action have evolved over time. For many years the reigning model assumed that culture shapes action by supplying the common values and ultimate ends toward which action can be directed. Sociologist Ann Swidler called the values model “fundamentally

⁶⁰ Walker, “*Somebody’s Calling My Name*,” 128.

⁶¹ Heilbut, *The Gospel Sound*, xxiii.

misleading.” Rather than action depending on individualistic interests or consensual cultural values, Swidler recognizes that action “is necessarily integrated into larger assemblages.” She instead posits culture as a “tool kit” of symbols, stories, rituals, and world-views, which people may use in varying configurations to solve different kinds of problems. Swidler sees culture’s causal significance not in defining ends of action, but in providing cultural components that are used to construct “strategies of action”—persistent ways of ordering action through time.⁶²

James C. Scott explains that when the tenor of the times and the temperature of the people permit (e.g., the Spanish Civil War of the late 1930s, *glasnost* of the late 1980s), the “offstage” discourse of the hidden transcript opens up and cultural resistance rises to the surface in a more overtly public manner. In a similar sense, Swidler argues that culture becomes more highly charged or fraught with meaning in “unsettled” periods—times of social transformation or ideological intensification. “In such situations,” she suggests, “culture may indeed be said to directly shape action.”⁶³

Under structural constraints and concrete historical circumstances, the success or failure of any social movement will hinge upon what strategies and cultural tools are employed. Even during more “settled” times, it is not cultural values that determine action in the long run. Indeed, Swidler concludes, “a culture has enduring effects on those who hold it, not by shaping the ends they pursue, but by providing the characteristic repertoire from which they build lines of action.”⁶⁴

Confirming generations of scholars, Lincoln and Mamiya determined in their definitive overview that the black church was both central institutional sector and unchallenged cultural womb of the African American community.⁶⁵ Not only did it historically serve critical economic, educational, and spiritual functions for a people generally shut out of white society, but the Afro-Christian church generated the cultural tool kit of prayers, oratory, testimonies, and music that galvanized the masses from slavery through freedom.

⁶² Ann Swidler, “Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies,” *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 51, No. 2 (Apr., 1986), 273-9, 284.

⁶³ Swidler, “Culture in Action,” 279.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 284.

⁶⁵ Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, 7-8.

Although some critics like E. Franklin Frazier depicted the black church as too escapist, quietist, or accommodating in the face of white oppression, Aldon Morris and others have documented a tradition of civic and political activism. In his seminal study of the civil rights movement, Morris found that the black church was its institutional center, supplying the places to congregate, the ministers to provide charismatic leadership, and most importantly, the mass base to mobilize.⁶⁶

Morris makes important note of culture's contribution to the classical Southern period, but like other movement studies, his analysis emphasizes the organizational networks and resources possessed by the African American church, or the individual personalities of its charismatic leaders. In fact, though church hymns were transformed into songs of freedom and sermons doubled as political addresses, relatively little attention has been given to exploring the role of black church culture in the civil rights movement.

We do have some interesting empirical studies that point the way. Sociologist Mary Pattillo-McCoy agrees that culture consists of “rhetorical, interactional, and material tools” that are organized into strategies of action, and finds that certain practices within the black church—prayer, Christian imagery, call-and-response interactions—are important parts of the cultural tool kit facilitating activism. Their power lies not only with complex issues of belief and faith, Pattillo-McCoy says, “but also in the *cultural* familiarity of these tools among African Americans as media for interacting, conducting a meeting, holding a rally, or getting out the vote.” Black church culture constitutes “a common language that leaders and followers, workers and supporters can share to coordinate action.”⁶⁷

Pattillo-McCoy suggests that the key to understanding the aptness of these tools for fostering mass social action is the “collective orientation of black Christian rhetoric and ritual.” She explains how black Christian spirituality is based on themes of manifestly *collective* deliverance and freedom, and how preachers and congregations use the call-and-response style in musical and verbal cooperation to “make

⁶⁶ Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 4-12.

⁶⁷ Mary Pattillo-McCoy, “Church Culture as a Strategy of Action in the Black Community,” *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 63, No. 6 (Dec., 1998), 770-1; Johnny E. Williams, “Linking Beliefs to Collective Action: Politicized Religious Beliefs and the Civil Rights Movement,” *Sociological Forum*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (Jun., 2002), 204.

the journey toward freedom as one body”—a transcendent experience resulting in dynamic communion and community rejuvenation. Hence it is not only the organizational abilities or mass-based political weight of the African American church, but its taken-for-granted cultural tools that are so important for putting civic efforts into action.⁶⁸

“The mass movement for civil rights has passed,” Pattillo-McCoy remarks, “yet the civic activism of black churches and church members persists at the local level and provides an opportunity to investigate these groups’ daily organization-building activities.” As the qualitative, micro-level focus of her cultural analysis demonstrates (she studies only a small black area in Chicago), the church “provides directions on how to interact, what rituals are appropriate, and what symbols may be invoked to inspire participants for social action.” Even the activities of many secular institutions in the neighborhood were infused with religious themes and took on the feel of a black church service. At a “gospel extravaganza” hosted by the public elementary school, the full program featured a group-sing, eleven choirs, and emotional solo performances by the school counselor and principal.⁶⁹

Because local residents are steeped in the black church, and since local politics must operate within a specific, heavily church-influenced cultural landscape, partisan political actors and organizers made repeated use of church styles. To illustrate, Pattillo-McCoy details one of the major public events of an aldermanic campaign—the “gospel rally” held at a neighborhood church. “The choirs and the speakers both used the cultural tools of the black church—preaching and singing as well as politicking—to raise people to their feet in praise.” As she concludes of the gospel-themed political event, “With ingredients from the black church, the goal of encouraging support was achieved.”⁷⁰

Political scientist Fredrick C. Harris similarly asks “how religion—as a set of institutions, a source of self-empowerment, and a sign of indigenous culture—mobilizes African Americans into the political process.” He argues that the interaction of nonmaterial, less tangible resources (group solidarity and symbolic expression) with larger institutional resources (funds, meeting places, and networks) is

⁶⁸ Pattillo-McCoy, “Church Culture as a Strategy of Action in the Black Community,” 767-70.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 767-8, 771-3.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 776-81.

crucial to political mobilization. Like Swidler, Harris recognizes that culture provides the worldviews and “sources of meaning” used to construct collective strategies of action. He finds that the sacred cultural repertoire of symbols, rituals, and practices have been “resources for black mobilization in a variety of historical settings and political contexts.”⁷¹

Noting that previous studies of Afro-Christian political life had underestimated the diversity of the black church, Harris goes beyond the “opiate-inspiration debate” by maintaining that the complex multidimensionality of black religion has served to legitimate *and* challenge the dominating political order. He argues that the church has affected political activism in two seemingly contradictory ways. On one hand, it has been a source of civic culture providing opportunities to practice organizing and civic skills that develop positive attitudes toward the civic order. On the other hand, it has provided blacks with both material resources and “oppositional consciousness and culture” that have been mobilized to resist their marginalization.⁷²

Following the ideas of Morris and others, Harris claims that black Christianity supplied the civil rights movement with the alternative worldviews rooted in divine justice and human equality that challenged the logic of white supremacy and fostered mass action. He concludes that black church culture “not only stimulates mobilization by serving as a guide for interpreting political goals but, just as important, it also provides sacredly ordained legitimacy to political action.”⁷³

It was not until sociologist Sandra L. Barnes that another scholar tested the relationship between black church culture and activism using *quantitative* techniques. To assess the key claims of the cultural tool kit theory, Barnes analyzed a sample of 1,863 black congregations from a number of perspectives. In 2000 Gallup conducted telephone surveys of clergy and senior lay leaders, who were asked to provide demographic data on their congregations. Using Pattillo-McCoy’s church culture repertoire model as a template, Barnes tested whether its components directly affect community action among African

⁷¹ Fredrick C. Harris, *Something Within: Religion in African-American Political Activism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 7-10, 28-40, 142.

⁷² Harris, *Something Within*, 7, 37-40, 135.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 40-1.

American congregations. Her findings indeed support the importance of black church culture as stimuli for community action, “but often in unexpected ways.” Results show that prayer, as identified through church and prayer groups, held “consistent, positive influence” in effecting community action.⁷⁴

Barnes further discovered that “gospel music is significant in six of the seven unadjusted models and is directly correlated with community involvement.” She emphasizes that the results “show clear linkages between gospel music as a cultural symbol and community action regardless of church and pastoral dynamics.” Significantly, she cites the need to study the relationship between semiotic coding, education, black church involvement, and African American activism. To her credit, Barnes realizes that “cultural framing is an art.” As she puts it: “Leadership must contend with multiple realities and multiple meanings because members often use different frames to interpret the same event.”⁷⁵

The “dialectical model” of Lincoln and Mamiya, which presents “a more dynamic view of black churches along a continuum of dialectical tensions, struggle and change,” is useful in explaining the “pluralism and pluralities that exist in black churches and black communities.” The polysemic nature of black church culture produced a multiplicity of meanings and interpretations. Sermons, prayers, or songs bearing messages of endurance through hardship could apply to escapist forethoughts of a rewarding afterlife or to realist battles against earthly oppression. Most ministers and laypersons were not active in organized protest activities, but those who were involved found black church culture a key resource influencing their activism.

Morris has remarked how in some periods “members of an oppressed group who appear docile are rapidly transformed into active protesters”—a process that is crucial to understanding a protest movement. With respect to the civil rights movement, he attempts to shed some light on this “largely unexplained” process. Morris explains that people’s attitudes are heavily shaped by important institutions like schools and churches, which interpret social reality and establish moral guidelines. These institutions also provide the “cultural content” molding individual attitudes, which if refocused could fairly rapidly

⁷⁴ Sandra L. Barnes, “Black Church Culture and Community Action,” *Social Forces*, Vol. 84, No. 2 (Dec., 2005), 975-8.

⁷⁵ Barnes, “Black Church Culture and Community Action,” 978-86.

accomplish a transformation of those attitudes. “Changing attitudes by refocusing the cultural content of institutions can be much more effective than changing the attitudes of separate individuals,” he reasons, “because institutional refocusing enables organizers to reach large numbers of people simultaneously.” The effects of refocusing the cultural content of the mass-based black church would have to be great, Morris assumes, because it significantly shaped the attitudes of so many blacks.⁷⁶

This is precisely what happened when Martin Luther King and other activist ministers began refocusing the cultural content of a significant number of black churches. In the mass meetings that resembled church revivals, King transformed the Christian messages of otherworldly meekness and patient humility expressed through “elaborate and eloquent rituals of song, prayers, and sermons,” into a new message of social justice in *this* world. Morris contends that a refocusing of black church culture content was required to “operationalize King’s view of religion.”⁷⁷ While the mobilization of material resources has usually been given more explanatory weight, the mass movement was largely successful by “retooling” the black church’s cultural “tool kit” towards the goals of civil rights activism.

Three years after Dr. King’s death, his junior colleague Reverend Andrew Young described the function of church culture in Southern organizing efforts during the civil rights movement. Young explained that King and other preachers developed a language and mobilizing strategy based on the religious inclinations and understandings of local people. “Nobody could have ever argued segregation and integration and gotten people convinced to do anything about that,” Young recalled. “But when Martin would talk about leaving the slavery of Egypt and wandering in the wilderness of separate but equal and moving into a promised land, somehow that made sense to folk. And they may not have understood it; it was probably nobody else’s political theory, but it was their grass roots ideology. It was their faith; it was the thing they had been nurtured on.” Young claimed that “when they heard that language, they responded.”⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 96.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁷⁸ Charles V. Hamilton, *The Black Preacher in America* (New York: William & Morrow, 1972), 132.

Reverend Young detailed how the sacred rituals and symbols of black church culture were employed for political mobilization. He explained how going into Mississippi and telling people they “needed to get themselves together and get organized” didn’t make much sense. “But if you started preaching to them about dry bones rising again, everybody had sung about dry bones. Everybody knew that language.”⁷⁹ A biblical symbol common to folk spirituals and gospel songs, the example of “dry bones” is an especially appropriate illustration of how church culture content was refocused to connect with grassroots gospel communities throughout the South.

“I think it was that cultural milieu,” Young continued, “when people were really united with the real meaning of that cultural heritage, and when they saw in their faith also a liberation struggle that they could identify with, then you kinda had ’em boxed in.” Young saw that black church culture provided “a ready framework around which you could organize people.” The fact that black churches offered not just a crucial institutional base but a common gospel culture, even in the smallest country town, was what gave civil rights activists “kind of [a] key to the first organizing phases.”⁸⁰

Evidence backing this insider account has been presented by sociologist Johnny E. Williams, whose extensive analysis of Arkansas from 1954-64 points to the “centrality of the church’s cultural resources in the emergence and maintenance of the civil rights protest.” Williams studied secondary and historical accounts of the civil rights movement; archival material, especially church and civil rights documents; and newspaper and other published works. He also drew data from personal interviews he conducted with individuals involved in the Arkansas movement of the fifties and sixties, focusing questions on the motivation to become and remain involved.⁸¹

Not surprisingly, Williams learned that local protest organizations and civic groups “frequently used churches as meeting places to reinvigorate their struggle, plan actions, fundraise, and recruit participants” well into the 1960s. More importantly, his findings support the theory that “culture, particularly religious culture, has a direct and independent role in facilitating collective action.” For

⁷⁹ Hamilton, *The Black Preacher in America*, 133.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Williams, “Politicized Religious Beliefs and the Civil Rights Movement,” 206-9.

African American churches not only provided valuable physical space and material resources, but black church cultural resources contained “insurgent ideational strands” that consistently inspired social action independent of structural conditions.⁸²

Specifically, Williams found that some African American church ministers, leaders, and key members interpreted and appropriated ostensibly “otherworldly” church culture content in activist ways. He discovered that a cadre of “early risers,” encouraged by their interpretation of black church culture to participate in activist networks and organize local movements, were instrumental factors in building collective action. One typical respondent maintained that church culture helped him “maneuver through the social environment by linking Gospel passages with worldly action,” while others suggested that their interpretations led them to believe they were “obligated to participate in actions to rid society of division and oppression.” In sum, Williams submits that black churches were “cultural places” where meaning encouraged movement mobilization. His data shows that church culture content played a crucial role in “transforming individual discontent into collective interests and action.”⁸³

It appears incontrovertible that black church culture was critical to the civil rights movement. Sociologists have provided evidence that church culture components, particularly prayer and gospel music, have been key factors in engendering community action. Though the new form early encountered disapproval from conservative elements within the black church, gospel was thoroughly entrenched in African American churches and communities well before the *Brown* decision or Montgomery boycott. Black gospel scholar Irene Jackson-Brown has noted how “by the forties gospel had revolutionized music in most black churches.”⁸⁴ By the onset of the movement in the fifties, gospel was at the very peak of its popularity and cultural influence. Hence it is difficult to imagine how gospel music could *not* have been employed to foster civil rights activism among the Southern masses steeped in black church culture.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 212.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 214-9.

⁸⁴ Irene Jackson-Brown, “Developments in Black Gospel Performance and Scholarship,” *Black Music Research Journal*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Spring, 1990), 36.

CHAPTER TWO: BLACK GOSPEL IN THE MOVEMENT

It was clear from the outset of the classical Southern phase of the postwar freedom struggle that black gospel music was an indispensable cultural tool for attracting and encouraging the African American masses. This chapter traces the significant presence of gospel throughout the major stages of movement history, with particular focus on the “gospelization” of freedom songs and local movements.

Gospel Culture and the American Protest Song Tradition

Sacred music was widely acknowledged as an invaluable cultural tool for facilitating protest long before the civil rights era of the mid-twentieth century. The Abolitionists, Grangers, the Populists, and rural segments of the American Socialist Party had all held quasi-religious camp meetings filled with songs and oratory. Labor leaders used similar techniques to draw people into the struggle for social and economic justice. Of the 1929 Marion textile strike in North Carolina, former coal miner and United Mine Workers official Tom Tippet recalled the “women and men stationed there chanting re-written Negro spirituals across the darkness to inspire faith and courage.”⁸⁵

The Socialist-led, racially-integrated Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU) was a prime example of an agricultural movement utilizing black sacred songs for organizational purposes. “STFU meetings were typified by their religious fervor, singing, and the use of biblical phrases as slogans,” notes folklorist R. Serge Denisoff. Cofounder H. L. Mitchell recalled that “there was a lot of good singing, especially among the Negro members who were quite good singers. They would sing the old Negro spirituals. Many of them are songs of protest that grew out of conditions that existed before slavery was abolished. Some of the spirituals seemed to fit in with the union program.”⁸⁶ One of the black spirituals he mentioned was selected as the official union song: “We Shall Not Be Moved,” a standard labor song of defiance that found renewed life in the civil rights movement.

⁸⁵ R. Serge Denisoff, “The Religious Roots of the American Song of Persuasion,” *Western Folklore*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (Jul., 1970), 177.

⁸⁶ Denisoff, “The Religious Roots of the American Song of Persuasion,” 182.

The musical voices of the STFU were A. B. Brookins and John L. Handcox. Resembling a camp meeting evangelist, Brookins was known for his ability to get others to sing. Handcox, a black preacher and sharecropper born and raised on an Arkansas plantation, was a major contributor to the union's songbag by writing and singing ballads based on religious material. The gospel hymn "Roll the Chariot On" was the basis for his most popular song, "Roll the Union On." Originally referring to a 1936 strike, the song was later revised by all-star folk group of the Old Left, the Almanac Singers.⁸⁷

As cofounder, principal organizer, and director of Highlander Folk School (HFS), Myles Horton created in the 1930s what became one of the most important institutions of the civil rights movement. Along with its emphasis on developing indigenous leadership, the HFS understood the vital importance of emotionally-charged culture in organizing and uplifting people. Highlander was "committed to a vision of change that respected the culture of the people with whom they are working," explains movement scholar Charles M. Payne. "Music and singing were an integral part of the Highlander experience."⁸⁸

The school's musical legacy was begun by Horton's wife Zilphia. As music department director, Zilphia traveled to oppressed communities and local sites of struggle, singing and recording songs along the way. She observed the power of music in protest activities on her visits to picket lines in the thirties and forties. In 1947, black women of the local Food, Tobacco, and Agricultural Workers Union in Charleston, South Carolina, brought to HFS an adapted gospel hymn called "We Will Overcome," which had been the leading song of their successful strike the previous year. Zilphia included the song in future Highlander workshops, helped spread it throughout the South, and introduced it to other left-wing folksingers like Pete Seeger. By the mid-fifties, it was being sung at union gatherings from coast to coast.⁸⁹

After Zilphia died in 1956, her musical mission at Highlander was carried on by Guy Carawan. It was largely through Carawan's educational and promotional efforts that the freedom song phenomenon

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 182-3.

⁸⁸ Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, [1995] 2007), 71.

⁸⁹ R. Serge Denisoff, *Great Day Coming: Folk Music and the American Left* (Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, [1971] 1973), 31; Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 148.

took the shape that it did. “Like Zilphia Horton before him, Guy Carawan believed that folk music was an important resource for democratic movements,” writes historian Peter J. Ling. Alluding to the hidden transcript of infrapolitical culture, Ling suggests that folk music, especially in its collective modes, “often conveyed the vernacular interpretation of a people’s history in a way that conflicted with the official version.”⁹⁰

In late 1959 Carawan went to Charleston, South Carolina, to help local activist and fellow HFS staff member Septima Clark supervise adult education classes. While serving as Clark’s driver, he was “keen to encourage the incorporation of folk music into the classes.” Carawan reported in February 1960 that singing had become a regular feature of the five Citizenship Schools, where he began sessions with protest songs from Highlander’s extensive repertoire and then encouraged students to sing their own songs. He noted that students often gave “beautiful testimony” about how their songs had enabled them to “overcome their many hardships and come through them still full of love for their fellow man.” Songs and sermons in the rich “sustainer” tradition of Afro-Christianity stressed messages of defiance, liberation, and divine justice. “Far from being an opiate that stifled resistance,” Ling maintains, “this sustaining repertoire of songs was a powerful and therapeutic cultural artifact.” As a practical organizational tool, the singing program effectively increased attendance at the Citizenship Schools.⁹¹

Carawan’s important role in developing and disseminating the freedom song repertoire was relatively brief, limited mostly to the 1960-61 period. Highlander’s youth program took on new urgency when the black student sit-in movement erupted in February 1960, and the school held a sit-in workshop for student leaders in April. As part of a talent show and dance, Carawan taught the students “We Shall Overcome” (Seeger changed “Will” to “Shall”). Two weeks later, over two hundred students assembled for a three-day conference at Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina. Carawan led the singing, and “We Shall Overcome” closed the first evening’s events as the audience joined hands and sang along. They went away inspired, and carried the song to meetings and demonstrations across the South.

⁹⁰ Peter J. Ling, “Developing Freedom Songs: Guy Carawan and the African-American Traditions of the South Carolina Sea Islands,” *History Workshop Journal*, No. 44 (Autumn, 1997), 202.

⁹¹ Ling, “Developing Freedom Songs,” 202-4.

By visiting movement communities and leading the singing at mass meetings and civil rights conferences, Carawan's most significant contribution was his instructional role in refocusing the cultural content of the African American church. By 1961, he had been instrumental in making the freedom song repertoire large, well-established, and widely known. But even as his instructional role diminished, Carawan continued publicizing on behalf of the civil rights movement. Most notable of these efforts was an important series of recordings he produced documenting prominent local "singing movements," including Nashville (1960), Albany, Georgia (1962), Birmingham (1963), and Greenwood, Mississippi (1965).⁹²

As these recordings demonstrate, black church music held a powerful presence at every stage in the movement. They also reveal the diversity of freedom songs, freedom singers, and performance styles, from revamped folk spirituals to contemporary urban gospel. As Jon Michael Spencer notes, "Typically each community movement had its own freedom songs, the verses varied according to the events occurring in that area. And each community had its own talented songwriters." He explains that the "litanies of the original and adapted protest songs were not only sung congregationally in the liturgy of mass meetings and during demonstrations, they were also professionally performed by freedom choirs." Spencer compares these professional freedom singers to similar performers in the twentieth-century labor and nineteenth-century abolitionist movements. Among these gospel-grounded performers were the Montgomery Trio, the Nashville Quartet, the SNCC Freedom Singers, and the "freedom choirs" of Birmingham and Selma, Alabama.⁹³

Freedom Songs and the Gospelization of Local Movements

The classical Southern movement of the fifties and sixties exhibited the same blend of older communal and newer gospel styles characterizing the range of black church music and the flexible gospel form itself. The pattern was quickly set in what Reverend Wyatt Tee Walker called the "granddaddy" of

⁹² *Ibid.*, 207.

⁹³ Spencer, *Protest and Praise*, 86, 88-9.

all singing movements: the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955-56. Black leaders, especially Southern clergymen, visited the highly visible Montgomery movement to learn from the impressively effective Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA). As Aldon Morris explains, by attending mass meetings, sitting in on executive sessions, and observing its functioning, they “came to understand the important political role that music and preaching played in organizing and removing fear from the masses.”⁹⁴

Morris has shown how the MIA and other early movement centers in the South “operated in a context of charisma, mass emotionalism, and mass enthusiasm in consequence of being church-related protest organizations.” Beyond the charismatic personalities of the ministers leading these groups, Morris underscores how the “new movement organizations inherited the vibrant church culture, with its tradition of bringing whole congregations into community activities, a guarantee of mass participation.” Heads were bowed for traditional prayers; leaders addressed meetings in the oratorical style of a preacher’s sermon; and of course, familiar spirituals and gospel songs were sung by all. Indeed, explains Morris, “mass participation at meetings was usually guaranteed because scripture reading, prayer, and hymns were built directly into the program.”⁹⁵

One of the Montgomery boycott’s chief organizers explained the importance of black church culture at MIA mass meetings. According to veteran activist E. D. Nixon, “If you are going to continue to lead a group of people you are going to have to put something into the program that those people like. A whole lot of people came to the MIA meetings for no other reason than just to hear the music, some came to hear the folks who spoke.”⁹⁶ The very first meeting showed the critical role of black church music. Martin Luther King, Jr., the leader of the MIA, vividly recalled the sound of that December evening: “The opening hymn was the old familiar ‘Onward Christian Soldiers,’ and when that mammoth audience stood to sing, the voices outside swelling the chorus in the church [Holt Street Baptist Church could not accommodate the large turnout], there was a mighty ring like the glad echo of heaven itself.”⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 56.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), 50.

Another hymn heard almost nightly was “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms,” a song expressing joy, peace, and safety that understandably resonated during a time that was neither safe nor peaceful in Montgomery’s African American community. “Leaning” became a popular freedom song, performed in congregational and gospel styles in mass meetings across the South.⁹⁸

The movement model for refocusing church culture content was established in Montgomery. When returning to Dexter Avenue Baptist Church after their mass arraignment for allegedly organizing an illegal boycott, the eighty-nine leaders were greeted by King with a refashioned “Old Time Religion.” A correspondent for *The Nation* described the scene:

Indeed the blending of “Old Time Religion” with a new determination to achieve racial equality is the essence of the boycott. . . . The meeting that day closed with the singing of “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen.” Here were two songs, both a part of Black traditional sacred music repertoire: One . . . was updated to address an immediate need of the movement; the second . . . was sung in its traditional form. On many occasions, the new borrowed from the old in the midst of movement activity. Those transformed songs, used in conjunction with older songs, effectively conveyed the message that the Black struggle had a long history.⁹⁹

Throughout that long history of struggle, and across the entire political spectrum, the black church’s cultural tool kit of prayers, sermons, and especially songs was proven fundamental to organizing and encouraging mass activism.

Montgomery also demonstrated how local singing movements developed indigenous songleaders that became renowned freedom singers. In 1954, the year of the historic Supreme Court ruling on school desegregation, Mary Ethel Dozier was a ten-year-old Montgomery schoolgirl who sang with her friends Minnie and Gladys in a youth gospel choir. After the first mass meetings in late 1955, they started singing for the MIA as the Montgomery Gospel Trio. As Dozier claims of their music during that seminal, year-long struggle, “All the songs I remember gave us strength to go on.”¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ Bernice Johnson Reagon, “The Civil Rights Movement,” in *African American Music: An Introduction*, ed. Mellonee V. Burnim and Portia K. Maultsby (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 601.

⁹⁹ Reagon, “The Civil Rights Movement,” 601-2.

¹⁰⁰ Notes to *Sing For Freedom: The Story of the Civil Rights Movement Through Its Songs*, Smithsonian/Folkways compact disc SF 40032. The Montgomery Trio selections were originally released on the 1961 album *We Shall Overcome: Songs of the “Freedom Riders” and the “Sit-Ins”* (FH 5991).

The young trio met Guy Carawan at a Highlander workshop in 1959, and he invited them to appear at a Carnegie Hall benefit for the beleaguered school in 1961. With Carawan on guitar, the Montgomery Trio recorded three songs from this period. Two of these were standard freedom songs drawn directly from the communal African American spiritual tradition: “Keep Your Hands on the Plow” (also known as “Hold On” or “Keep Your Eyes on the Prize”) and “This Little Light,” described by John Lovell as among the old songs containing “broad symbolisms” which “state an educational desire and determination which only the blind can totally miss.”¹⁰¹

The third song recorded by the trio, “We Are Soldiers in the Army,” was not a retooled spiritual but an adaptation of a contemporary gospel composition. Recorded by professional gospel performers and especially popular with gospel choirs, James Cleveland’s “Soldiers in the Army” was for obvious reasons an ideal song for movement purposes. In Montgomery, apart from the trio’s renditions, it was sung in unaccompanied congregational style at mass meetings.

Another recording of “Soldiers” made in Danville, Virginia, is an especially insightful example of movement culture. There were significant resemblances between mass meetings and gospel programs during the civil rights era. Both were held mostly in churches for church-steeped people. And both were structurally modeled on black church services: prayers, testimonies, oratory, congregational singing, and donation collections were regular components of grassroots gospel shows as well as mass meetings. On this live 1963 recording, following a collective “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms,” Reverend Lawrence Campbell’s impassioned sermon recounts details from the Danville struggle, before his rough baritone voice leads the clapping, stomping gospel congregation through “We Are Soldiers” in rousing call-and-response tradition.¹⁰²

Four college students catalyzed the sit-in phenomenon in North Carolina on February 1, 1960. In their immediate wake, student leaders from Nashville moved to the forefront of this crucial next phase of the civil rights movement. Guided by local activist ministers, the students were already engaged in

¹⁰¹ Lovell, *Black Song*, 167.

¹⁰² “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms,” “Sermon” and “We Are Soldiers in the Army” appear on *Voices of the Civil Rights Movement: Black American Freedom Songs 1960-1966*, Smithsonian/Folkways compact disc SF 40084.

nonviolence training workshops when the sit-ins began. Though the impetus came from the students, the adults committed the organizational skills and resources to support them. Indeed, the student movement in Nashville was intimately connected to the city's network of activist churches.

An older generation of African Americans, such as those attending Highlander's first Citizenship Schools in the South Carolina Sea Islands, related instantly to traditional communal singing overlaid with new political lyrics. But Guy Carawan found that the Nashville sit-in students "initially reacted with embarrassment to new freedom songs that were sung with handclapping and in a rural free swinging style." However, with prompting from Carawan and others, Southern students modified the older forms by adding their own words and stylistic embellishments to create the first wave of contemporary freedom songs, documented in the 1960 movement album *The Nashville Sit-In Story*.¹⁰³

"Conceived, Coordinated and Directed" by Carawan, recorded in Nashville, and "Creatively Edited" in a New York studio, *The Nashville Sit-In Story* is a chronicle of the movement's highlights told from the perspective of its young participants.¹⁰⁴ It features reenactments of scenes from the lunch counter, the jail, the courtroom, and the steps of City Hall, where Mayor Ben West was pressured by student leader Diane Nash to publicly disavow segregation in Nashville. Along with some interviews, inspirational commentary, and student testimonies (Nash, John Lewis, and Marion Barry), the album includes several musical selections.

It all leads off with the song taught to the students by Carawan himself, a group rendition of "We Shall Overcome." Similarly reserved versions of traditional black songs "I'm Going to Sit at the Welcome Table" and "We Shall Not Be Moved" also appear. Closely resembling the contemporary "hootenanny" folk sound pioneered by Highlander and popularized by Pete Seeger, the somewhat tepid if earnest delivery of these freedom songs accurately reflects the interracial composition of the Nashville sit-ins, with the notable participation of white middle-class college students unaccustomed to the raw emotional expressiveness of black church culture.

¹⁰³ Ward, *Just My Soul Responding*, 294.

¹⁰⁴ *The Nashville Sit-In Story*, Folkways Records FH 5590.

By far the most interesting music is found in the “Jail Sequence,” two songs by an a cappella vocal group including student leaders James Bevel and Bernard Lafayette dubbed the Nashville Quartet. The performance style of the group—not surprisingly—is squarely within the male quartet tradition of black gospel. When the student demonstrators are taken to jail and segregated into different cells, to keep up morale the quartet offer their comrades some impromptu entertainment. They begin with a single verse of “You Better Leave Segregation Alone,” based on the 1959 Rhythm and Blues hit “Leave My Kitten Alone” by Little Willie John. Bevel then prefaces their next song with an anecdote about the racist father of his white neighbor, who would not allow the boys to play together—even though their dogs always did. “Your Dog Loves My Dog” is pure gospel, as the tenor lead of Bevel, in classic quartet fashion, floats atop the repetitive chant of his partners (*“My dog, a-love your dog / and your dog, a-love my dog”*). Both songs addressed serious social issues with a comic spin, reflecting the sardonic humor of Bevel and Lafayette. And both songs were unmistakably molded from the black gospel tradition permeating the growing freedom song phenomenon.

That year of 1960 was an important one for the civil rights movement, marking the midpoint between the Alabama bookends of Montgomery and Selma. The sit-ins revived the flagging momentum established a half-decade earlier, pushing movement tactics beyond passive resistance into the more confrontational realm of direct action. From the time of the spring student summit at Highlander to the fall conference that founded the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the body of movement music had grown considerably in size and diversity.

The next stage in the postwar freedom struggle came the following year with the advent of the Freedom Rides, which contributed substantially to the production and dissemination of freedom songs. “The Freedom Rides, like the sit-ins, generated movement activity and music,” Morris notes, “helping to educate and galvanize the black community for protest.”¹⁰⁵ Whether facing menacing mobs in bus station terminals, or bracing each other in Southern jails, the Freedom Riders invariably used collective song to bolster spirits and maintain will.

¹⁰⁵ Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 233.

When a Dr. King-led mass meeting supporting the battered Freedom Riders at Montgomery's First Baptist Church came under harrowing siege, the packed assembly sang the popular gospel hymn of refuge "Love Lifted Me." Bricks were hurled through the church windows while cars burned outside. Only a handful of U.S. Marshals, later reinforced by the Alabama National Guard, held off the thousands of rampaging whites from going further and doing worse. As the long night wore on and the worst fears dissipated, hymns were interspersed with more common movement music, with some singing led by the Freedom Riders themselves. According to historian Raymond Arsenault, "Even in the face of tear gas [seeping inside through the shattered windows] and surging rioters, freedom songs reverberated through the sanctuary."¹⁰⁶

Later in the Freedom Rides, in Mississippi's Hinds County Jail, a minister from Aurora, Illinois, repurposed the old gospel song "Woke Up This Morning With My Mind On Jesus." By late summer 1961, "Woke Up This Morning With My Mind On Freedom" was a popular movement song, especially in McComb, Mississippi, where it became the unofficial anthem of local voter registration drives.¹⁰⁷

SNCC was heavily involved in organizing Deep South communities by late 1961. That fall, SNCC field secretaries Charles Sherrod and Cordell Hull Reagon arrived in Albany, Georgia, with that goal in mind. Described by Taylor Branch as a "country mystic, deeply religious with a stubborn streak," Sherrod was a 24-year-old Baptist minister from Virginia Union Seminary who had recently distinguished himself as an original SNCC volunteer for the "jail-in" at Rock Hill, South Carolina.¹⁰⁸ Nashville native Reagon, a precocious high school veteran of the sit-ins, the Freedom Rides, and notorious Mississippi jails, had already proven himself an eager and fearless activist. Together the young pair helped establish Albany as perhaps the premier "singing movement" of the civil rights era. At the very least, because of the memorable role music played in that important struggle, it became the first local movement widely recognized as such.

¹⁰⁶ Raymond Arsenault, *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 233-6

¹⁰⁷ Arsenault, *Freedom Riders*, 639.

¹⁰⁸ Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-63* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), 479.

Sherrod and Reagon entered the community quietly, at first sleeping in abandoned cars and eventually recruiting around high school playgrounds and the campus of Albany State College. They also reached out to local ministers, efforts helped by Sherrod's training. Mass direct action began in November 1961 with attempts to desegregate interstate bus facilities. Two students from Albany State College were arrested and refused bail, leading to the first mass student demonstrations. This led to the formation of the Albany Movement, an "organization of organizations" like the MIA, with regular mass meetings held in African American churches.

An Albany Movement veteran recalled how the singing in jails and at mass meetings "provided energy and unity for those who came forward to be a part of a growing struggle." The music of the movement attracted national attention, particularly from several articles by *New York Times* folk music critic Robert Shelton, one of which quoted SNCC's Charles Jones. "There could have been no Albany movement without music," Jones declared. "We could not have communicated with the masses of people without music and they could not have communicated with us. . . . But through songs, they expressed years of suppressed hope, suffering, even joy and love."¹⁰⁹ Echoing his colleague, Reagon later affirmed that "without the songs, the Albany movement could not have been."¹¹⁰

After witnessing the galvanizing power of this music on a trip to Albany, Pete Seeger suggested to SNCC Executive Secretary James Forman that his organization form a fund-raising singing group like the one Seeger cofounded in the early forties, the Almanac Singers. Forman turned to Cordell Reagon, an extroverted performer with a clear tenor voice, who had been singing freedom songs at Albany Movement meetings with two gifted singers he discovered in SNCC workshops. College students Rutha Mae Harris and Cordell Reagon's future wife Bernice Johnson were both local preachers' daughters studying voice, and they helped Reagon recruit Charles Neblett, a veteran of civil rights demonstrations in southern Illinois.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ Reagon, "The Civil Rights Movement," 611-2.

¹¹⁰ Kerran L. Sanger, "*When the Spirit Says Sing!*": *The Role of Freedom Songs in the Civil Rights Movement* (New York and London: Garland, 1995), 18.

¹¹¹ Reagon, "The Civil Rights Movement,"

“Gospel Sing for Freedom,” a September 1962 benefit concert in Chicago featuring gospel artists performing in support of SNCC, though not a financial success, marked one of the first times Reagon directed a SNCC freedom chorus. Bernice Johnson, who was attending Atlanta’s Spelman College after expulsion from Albany State for her activism, joined the group of songleaders Reagon pulled together, most of them from the Albany Movement: SNCC field secretaries Reagon, Sherrod, and Jones were joined by Johnson and Harris, along with Neblett and another female singer. After the concert, Jones and Sherrod returned to organizing in southwest Georgia, leaving the core of Reagon, Johnson, Harris, and Neblett to form the SNCC Freedom Singers in December 1962.¹¹²

The SNCC Freedom Singers are today the best remembered movement singers from the civil rights period. In their first nine months, they logged tens of thousands of miles through forty states in a donated station wagon. From living room floors to concert halls, in elementary schools and universities, at minor political rallies and the Great March on Washington, the group sang freedom songs to raise awareness for the Southern struggle and raise money for the struggling movement. The original unit lasted just a single year, whereupon another group of SNCC Freedom Singers took their place.

In that short time together, the original Freedom Singers made some recordings for the Mercury label, found on their sole album “*We Shall Overcome*.” Performing in various unaccompanied black church styles, their repertoire covered the whole range of freedom songs up to that point, but strongly favored the old spirituals heard at mass meetings in grassroots communities. Mainstays like “We Shall Not Be Moved” and especially the album title track were movement anthems by that time. “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around” and “This Little Light of Mine” also appear on that 1963 release.¹¹³

The SNCC Freedom Singers were invited to the 1963 Newport Folk Festival, to perform on a historic bill including folk stars Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan, and Joan Baez, blues legends Mississippi John Hurt and John Lee Hooker, blind blues evangelist Reverend Gary Davis, and the Georgia Sea Island Singers. Vanguard Records released half a dozen albums documenting the concerts, with the Freedom

¹¹² Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 531-2; Reagon, “The Civil Rights Movement,” 615-6.

¹¹³ “*We Shall Overcome*,” Freedom Singers, Mercury Records MG 20879.

Singers appearing on two LPs. On *Newport Broadside*, dedicated to the festival's "topical songs," they close the first side with three songs. In his liner notes, *New York Times* writer Robert Shelton (under pen name "Stacey Williams") states that the group sings "unaccompanied in the traditional fashion, but range[s] from the oldest musical forms to the newest."¹¹⁴

Their first song on the album, "Fighting For Our Rights," is correctly identified by Shelton as "a reworking of a rock 'n' roll tune."¹¹⁵ Indeed the song was clearly based on the 1956 Ray Charles hit "Lonely Avenue." Yet what Shelton probably failed to catch is that the Ray Charles melody was itself a virtual note-for-note copy of another song from three years earlier, "I've Got a New Home" by the Pilgrim Travelers, one of the classic male quartets in the Golden Age of Gospel.

More recordings were made of the SNCC Freedom Singers that busy year of 1963, including some released on a 1980 Smithsonian Institution project compiled and annotated by Bernice Johnson Reagon. "Woke Up This Morning With My Mind On Freedom," the adapted gospel song that came from the Freedom Rides jail experience, is powerfully led by Reagon (then Bernice Johnson). In her own words, this clapping quartet version "is performed in a congregational song style while maintaining aspects of the arranged gospel version."¹¹⁶

The Smithsonian collection contains recordings from a Los Angeles session in August 1963, including one with Cordell Reagon taking James Bevel's gospel lead on "Dog, Dog," a cover of the Nashville Quartet's "Your Dog Loves My Dog" (appearing as "I Love Your Dog, I Love My Dog" on *Newport Broadside* and simply as "Dogs" on the Freedom Singers' Mercury album).

Like Bernice Johnson, Bertha Gober was expelled from Albany State for movement activities. An Atlanta native, she would become one of the civil rights movement's most important songwriters. The freedom song she co-created in jail, "Oh Pritchett, Oh Kelly," was named for Albany Police Chief Laurie Pritchett and Mayor Asa Kelly. This performance retains much of the format of the arranged spiritual "Rockin' Jerusalem," which Gober had sung solo in her high school choir.

¹¹⁴ Notes to *Newport Broadside*, Vanguard Records VSD-79144.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ Notes to *Voices of the Civil Rights Movement*, 29.

From the same August 1963 session, in a clear illustration of popular sacred and secular forms impacting movement music, Gober sings an unaccompanied solo arrangement of the haunting spiritual “I Told Jesus.” With a background in jazz and gospel singing, Gober demonstrates the delicate lyricism of her vocal style on this rendition, very likely borrowed from a live 1961 Nina Simone recording under the title “If He Changed My Name.”¹¹⁷

Although most of Guy Carawan’s projects were made for the left-wing Folkways imprint, he promoted the Albany Movement on a 1962 album for the same folk-oriented Vanguard label that would put out the Newport festival series. Specially manufactured by Vanguard for SNCC, and produced by Carawan with prominent folklorist Alan Lomax, *Freedom in the Air: Albany, Georgia* is an aural documentary of the mass meetings that had gained such widespread attention.

Though long out of print, an excerpt from the Albany album is found on another Smithsonian Folkways collection of music from the civil rights movement. Conveniently, the almost five-and-a-half-minute sample features an edited blend of the black church’s crucial culture components. Beginning with a swooning congregational hymn, it moves into a sermon by Reverend Ben Gay stressing the need to “shine” and “stand together” in their struggle. Then comes an uplifting gospel choir rendition of “I Woke Up This Morning With My Mind On Freedom.” Next a guitar (probably Carawan) strums an opening chord for a freedom chorus to sing “Keep Your Eyes on the Prize,” while Charles Jones and Cordell Reagon comment on the cross-class unity of the Albany Movement. When this fades, the same moaning hymn from the start closes the segment.¹¹⁸

Fittingly, this was the standard sequence of mass meetings in compressed form: they started with old-time unaccompanied songs and prayers, followed with inspirational oratory, and usually climaxed with “gospelized” freedom songs geared toward energetic young people. Not coincidentally, this was the same basic format characterizing Afro-Christian worship services, as well as black gospel music programs—especially those held in churches, which was most of them.

¹¹⁷ Versions of “Oh Pritchett, Oh Kelly” appear on *Sing For Freedom* and *Voices of the Civil Rights Movement*. “I Told Jesus” is found on the latter collection.

¹¹⁸ The mass meeting material from *Freedom in the Air: Albany, Georgia* is found on *Sing For Freedom*.

If gospel was only beginning to transform the culture of some smaller country churches in the golden age fifties, the music had developed into a mass art form in the black churches of many cities. With its great waves of Southern migrants and dynamic musical makeup, Chicago was the black gospel mecca from the start. Other major gospel cities included Philadelphia, Memphis, and Detroit. But aside from Chicago with its advanced gospel music industry, arguably no place was more significant to developing the gospel art than Birmingham. Certainly no other singing movement was as thoroughly steeped in black gospel culture.

When it comes to the central claim of this thesis—that gospel was critical to the civil rights movement—there is no stronger historical example than the Southern city generally considered to have been a key turning point in the postwar freedom struggle. Indeed, black gospel music, the black church, and black protest coalesced like nowhere else in Birmingham, without question the most remarkable local movement of the entire classical Southern period.

The development of the coal and iron industry led to a great influx of rural blacks into Jefferson County, Alabama, encompassing the adjacent cities of Birmingham-Bessemer-Fairfield, and their rural suburbs. Sprawling settlements of industrial workers surrounded the mines and mills, and community life within the mining camps, company quarters, and other segregated black districts was particularly rich in fellowship. Doug Seroff has shown that a distinctive, community-based quartet tradition emerged in Jefferson County which “answered the needs and conformed to the tastes of an increasingly urban twentieth-century black population.” Mass in-migration brought together a regional variety of sacred singing styles, and quartets were organized in African American churches, schools, and places of work. “Denied access to other forms of popular entertainment and diversion,” Seroff writes, “quartet singing became a general pastime for Jefferson County’s black youth.”¹¹⁹

The refined, university-style of quartet singing arrived in the area by 1915. The new generation of gospel quartets made up of miners and mill workers introduced blues feeling, jazz rhythm, and other

¹¹⁹ Doug Seroff, “On the Battlefield: Gospel Quartets in Jefferson County, Alabama,” in *Repercussions: A Celebration of African-American Music*, ed. Geoffrey Haydon and Dennis Marks (London: Century Publishing, 1985), 34-6.

secular musical influences. While groundbreaking developments in black gospel songwriting, choral singing, and solo performance were occurring in Chicago and elsewhere, the unique male quartet sound was being pioneered in Jefferson County, where quartet trainers were highly respected and influential members of the early gospel community. “Every house you go, somebody was in a quartet,” remarked one singer of that thriving formative period. “Bessemer was full of ’em!” The Jefferson County quartet style spread throughout the Deep South. Texas had its own distinctive quartet heritage, and the arrival there of two important Bessemer groups in the 1930s ushered in the golden age of gospel quartet singing toward the end of the decade.¹²⁰

Again, the gospel quartet tradition was deeply suffused into the fabric of African American communities, especially in Southern cities. Moreover, it was a significant vessel of the infrapolitics that gave voice and cultural meaning to working-class blacks. “Average black workers probably experienced greater participatory democracy in community- and neighborhood-based institutions than in interracial trade unions that claimed to speak for them,” suggests Robin D. G. Kelley. “Anchored in a prophetic religious ideology, these collectivist institutions and practices took root and flourished in a profoundly undemocratic society.” Another scholar has shown that gospel quartets were crucial to the expansion and legitimation of the Congress of Industrial Workers (CIO) in Birmingham.¹²¹ For example, the Sterling Jubilees—organized in 1929 from employees of U.S. Pipe and Foundry, more commonly known as the Bessemer Pipe Shop—had a long historical relationship with the Steel Workers’ Union, singing for many years under the name CIO Singers.¹²²

When quartet music emerged as a powerful cultural force in the 1940s, a scattered network of community-based folk artists became a vast army of black quartets that traversed the country, made commercial recordings, and proliferated on radio. Many successful careers were launched, but plenty of capable quartets and individual singers declined the tough life of the gospel highway. Some had the talent

¹²⁰ Seroff, “On the Battlefield,” 37-43.

¹²¹ Kelley, “We Are Not What We Seem,” 83. On gospel quartets, Birmingham, and the CIO, Kelley cites the work of Brenda McCallum (1988).

¹²² Seroff, “On the Battlefield,” 46.

and opportunity to become full-time touring performers, but were content to stay in Jefferson County and retain steady industrial employment. Seroff states that the “non-professional, working-class quartet of the golden age often was of a grand stamp.” Though their travelling options and recording opportunities were limited, the local reputations of these groups, boosted by local radio exposure, were enough to keep them happily at home. “There has always been a large and avid gospel audience and an energetic promotional network in Birmingham,” Seroff noted in the 1980s. During the artistic zenith of the quartet form in the forties and fifties, major gospel programs brought the top acts to Jefferson County, usually to perform in the Birmingham City Auditorium.¹²³

Can it not be reasonably assumed that the same communal cohesion found in Birmingham’s exceptional black gospel community was also manifest in the city’s local movement that forever changed America in the early 1960s? Even as noted church critic E. Franklin Frazier somewhat grudgingly acknowledged that gospel singers were using black religious culture to engage their social predicament, Birmingham was establishing gospel music as an indispensable cultural tool for engendering African American social action.

What Aldon Morris calls the “tripartite system” of economic, political, and personal domination was firmly entrenched and reinforced by violence in Birmingham—earning that city the well-deserved nickname “Bombingham” for its many “unsolved” episodes of anti-black terrorism. Massive white resistance following the *Brown* decision led to Alabama legally banning the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1956. This was a major blow to the organization, which had its Southern regional headquarters in Birmingham, as well as over 14,000 members in fifty-eight branches across the state.¹²⁴

Boldly stepping into this breach was a local NAACP leader, the minister of Birmingham’s Bethel Baptist Church and one of the key figures of the civil rights movement, Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth. Together with allies in the community and local ministry, Shuttlesworth formed under his charismatic

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 44-5.

¹²⁴ Morris, *The Origin of the Civil Rights Movement*, 68.

(and often imperious) leadership the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR). A minister-led organization like the MIA, the ACMHR held rotating mass meetings at various churches every Monday night. “[W]hen things were really hot,” recalled Shuttlesworth, “we would hold mass meetings every night.” As Morris describes them, meetings “were packed with community folk who came out to fight against domination and participate in the fervent religious culture that undergirded the movement.”¹²⁵ More than any postwar civil rights institution, the ACMHR epitomized the synergistic confluence of activist churches, the African American protest tradition, and modern black gospel music in its fully-developed urban form.

Fearless, outspoken, and a staunch advocate of direct action, Shuttlesworth was the victim of racist reprisals numerous times in the first years of the ACMHR. His church and attached family home were bombed more than once. He was pummeled and chain-whipped by a white mob for escorting his children to integrate a local school. At the start of February 1960, he happened to be preaching in High Point, North Carolina, when the sit-in movement was launched in nearby Greensboro. The confrontational strategy struck a chord with Shuttlesworth, who telephoned the Atlanta office of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) to urge support for the students.

In July 1960, the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights Choir was organized at the 46th Street Baptist Church. The twenty-three founding members of the Birmingham Movement Choir (as it was also called) were formed “to organize and enhance the spiritual portion of the movement.” Composed of “dedicated and tireless souls of many denominations, who are determined to be free,” this greatest of freedom choirs was a major feature of the legendary mass meetings during the most intense movement years.¹²⁶

Unlike the local movements in Montgomery and Albany, which mainly engaged in the traditional communal singing of older congregational hymns, the music of the sixty-voice Birmingham Movement Choir was strictly contemporary gospel under its director, arranger, and organist Carlton Reese. Coming

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 68-9.

¹²⁶ “History of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights Choir,” box 1, Shuttlesworth Papers.

from a prominent musical family, Reese took charge of the ACMHR Choir shortly after graduating high school in 1960. He also worked for the movement in other ways. In the months before the SCLC kicked off its 1963 Birmingham campaign, the 21-year-old Reese was one of the Shuttlesworth followers who impressed Wyatt Tee Walker with their availability and usefulness during the meticulous planning stages. The young gospel musician was also among the very first ACMHR protestors arrested when the demonstrations began in early April.¹²⁷

By 1963 the SCLC was a powerful civil rights organization, and the ACMHR was one of the strongest member organizations under its banner. As Morris argues, the successes gained in Birmingham are attributable not only to the systematically implemented SCLC strategy, but also to the “internal cohesion within the SCLC and within the Birmingham black community.” According to Morris, “Cultural forces, including music, religious oratory, prayers, and shared symbols, operated to produce the cohesion.”¹²⁸

The Afro-Christian charisma of ministers Martin Luther King, Ralph David Abernathy, and Fred Shuttlesworth, as well as the ACMHR choir’s galvanizing gospel music, provided the unifying cultural bonds that helped make Birmingham the climactic battle of the civil rights movement. The SCLC leaders were utterly dependent upon the nightly meetings to disseminate information, to inspire faith and courage, and not least to attract and maintain mass participation through the gospelized freedom songs of the Birmingham Movement Choir.

The Birmingham plan of 1963 was code named “Project C” for “confrontation” with the three-pronged white power structure: the business and industrial elites, the political elites, and the city’s white extremist groups and general white population.¹²⁹ Employing a mix of economic boycott and massive demonstrations, the Birmingham campaign commenced with a solid month of daily mass marches by singing protestors. They promptly landed in the jail of arch-segregationist Eugene “Bull” Connor.

¹²⁷ Andrew M. Manis, *A Fire You Can’t Put Out: The Civil Rights Life of Birmingham’s Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth* (Tuscaloosa and London: The University of Alabama Press, 1999), 334, 345.

¹²⁸ Morris, *The Origin of the Civil Rights Movement*, 250-1.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 257-8.

One of the leading actors in the Birmingham drama combined the roles of charismatic Baptist preacher, enthusiastic student activist, and gospel-rooted freedom singer into a single complex character. James Bevel moved over from SNCC into the SCLC camp to assist in youth organizing efforts, and went to Birmingham for that purpose. Taylor Branch tells of how “Bevel’s afternoon workshops for students had grown so large that they outnumbered the regular mass meetings.” Younger and younger students showed up every day, full of bravado and ready to march to jail.¹³⁰ With Dr. King’s permission, Bevel announced that a special march of high school students would take place with or without a permit on May 2—what Bevel and Project C architect Wyatt Tee Walker called “D-Day.” Hundreds of children from the workshops were eager to participate.

Leaflets circulated high schools and black radio station WENN broadcasted announcements about the “party” at Kelly Ingram Park, across from Walker’s headquarters at Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. Of course, popular African American radio personalities Shelley “the Playboy” Stewart and “Tall Paul” White did not wish to provoke hostile whites, offend sponsors, or run afoul of white station owners. In a fascinating example of the hidden transcript, they used jive-coded messages and played certain songs to transmit information about meetings, cue marches, and outmaneuver police. According to Brian Ward, “As demonstrators gathered in various churches around the city early each morning to learn plans for the day’s protests, [WENN’s Erskine] Faush would play [gospel group] the Highway Q.C.’s equalitarian hymn ‘All Men Are Made by God’ as the signal for them to take to the streets.”¹³¹

On the appointed D-Day, with reinforced police squads surrounding Sixteenth Street Baptist Church and crowds of black bystanders gathered in the park, high-spirited freedom songs emanated from the building when the doors flung open shortly before one o’clock. Under Bevel’s leadership, hundreds of kids were sent downtown in successive waves singing “We Shall Overcome” and “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around,” each wave larger than the next and set on different routes to confuse police. As they were frantically detained, an elderly woman among the cheering observers ecstatically shouted

¹³⁰ Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 750-2.

¹³¹ Brian Ward, *Radio and the Struggle for Civil Rights in the South* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004), 202.

“Sing, children, sing!”¹³² More than a thousand young demonstrators were jailed by the end of the day, precipitating an even greater crisis on the hands of Birmingham’s power structure.

Fifteen hundred more students were absent from school the next day. Once again, the sounds of mass praying and singing energized Sixteenth Street Baptist Church before the children emerged around one o’clock. It was on this fateful date of Friday, May 3, that Bull Connor turned his billy-clubs, dogs, and fire hoses upon the African American youth of Birmingham, Alabama, for a shocked and appalled world to witness.

After Bevel’s one-day moratorium, demonstrations were stepped up on May 5, which became known as “Miracle Sunday” for the extraordinary events that transpired. Black church culture “weighed heavily in the power struggle taking place in the streets,” Morris emphasizes, “and many consider that day the turning point in the movement.”¹³³ The city swelled over the weekend, as droves of reporters and activists descended upon Birmingham in the wake of the stunning children’s marches. Guy Carawan and Joan Baez crossed paths early in the day; Baez was there for a concert appearance, and Carawan came to record a mass meeting for Folkways. With Baez “more than a little apprehensive about crossing the race barrier in a city poised for war,” she was glad to accept Carawan’s escort to the morning service and afternoon mass meeting at New Pilgrim Church.¹³⁴

Inside that church, as one of the very few whites present despite Connor’s interracial ban, the 22-year-old folksinger encountered the moving gospel music of the Birmingham Movement Choir. To describe its effect on the astonished Baez, Branch recreates the scene: “There were sweet spirituals, arrhythmic blues solos, and thundering gospel numbers—all intensified by the imminent surrender to jail—and the power of it melted Baez’s alien separateness so that she shouted and cried, and looked close enough to a happy seizure that she came briefly to the attention of the roving ushers.”¹³⁵ In other words, with the help of the ACMHR Choir, Baez had felt something of the transcendent gospel experience.

¹³² Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 756-7.

¹³³ Morris, *The Origin of the Civil Rights Movement*, 267.

¹³⁴ Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 766.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

Later at the mass meeting, after Andy Young interrupted to announce that Guy and wife Candie Carawan had just gotten arrested on the church steps, an angry Bevel approached the pulpit. “We’re tired of this mess!” he shouted. “Let’s all get up!” Waving his arms, Bevel directed a packed congregation to march out of the church in a spontaneous demonstration while the music soared. When they spilled out of New Pilgrim, “Bull Connor himself walked out into the tangle of fire hoses to confront them.” As the people approached the fire trucks and police barricades, they sang the gospel standard “I Want Jesus To Walk With Me” for encouragement.¹³⁶

What happened next was the so-called “miracle” of that Birmingham Sunday. Led past startled police officers by Reverend Charles Billups, the procession was ordered by Bull Connor to turn back. Following Billups, the column knelt down on the pavement in prayer. Billups then stood up and chanted loudly enough for the distant reporters to hear: “Turn on your water! Turn loose your dogs! We will stand here ’til we die!” Tears streamed down the minister’s face, the crowd chimed in, and a mass freedom chorus was raised. Many trembled in fearful anticipation, but it was soon noticed that the firemen would not—or could not—blast them with the hoses. Connor supposedly growled “Dammit! Turn on the hoses!” But the firemen fell back, some of them cried, and one was heard to say, “We’re here to put out fires, not people.”

As though in a trance, Reverend Billups continued leading the marchers over the hoses, past the pumps, and into a small segregated park for another round of prayer. Before returning to New Pilgrim, the joyous demonstrators sang another adapted gospel song: “Up Above My Head I See Freedom in the Air.” Although Connor tried brushing off the incident as insignificant, most of the black witnesses could not help but see the miraculous “hand of God” in what took place.

The Carawans had spent two days in the Birmingham jail, where they collected more freedom songs, but were released in time to record the third of four mass meetings on that Monday, May 6, 1963.

¹³⁶ Though Connor’s restrictions on observers have created some uncertainty over details, most accounts tell essentially the same dramatic story. The version here is based on the Pulitzer Prize-winning narratives of Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 766-8, and Diane McWhorter, *Carry Me Home: Birmingham, Alabama: The Climactic Battle of the Civil Rights Revolution* (New York: Touchstone, 2001), 386-7.

Coming at the high point of the Birmingham confrontation, and thus encapsulating a specific high point of the civil rights struggle, the result was a definite high point in the string of movement albums produced by Guy Carawan (who scrambled on a platform from voice to voice wielding a single microphone to record the meeting with surprising clarity). Though not released by Folkways until 1980 as the second volume of a three-part series called *Lest We Forget*, the album is one of the most significant historical documents of the civil rights movement. And half of this precious primary source amounts to a golden age gospel music program captured live in a black Birmingham church—which by itself would make it a rare and valuable piece of American cultural history.

The opening track is a seven-and-a-half-minute take on probably the best known of all spirituals: “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.” The performance leads off with the high, clear voice of teenage soprano Cleo Kennedy, one of the many youngsters who went to jail during the campaign. Kennedy delivers the lines of this old slave song at a traditionally slow, dirge-like tempo, accompanied only by the subtly swirling organ of Carlton Reese. Then the number abruptly leaps into the up-tempo gospel standard “Swing Down Sweet Chariot” (better known as “Rock Me, Lord”), backed by the full ACMHR Choir and led by the huskier, grittier gospel vocals of another female.¹³⁷

After thirteen minutes of downhome speechifying by Reverend Ralph Abernathy, the first side of the Birmingham album closes with a gospel arrangement of another freedom song coming out of the musically fertile Albany Movement. With organ and choir in call-and-response support of Mamie Brown’s lead voice, “I’m On My Way” is set to the same classic gospel tune as “Up Above My Head.” With typical refashioning, the original words “*Canaan land*” or “*heavenly land*” have become “*freedom land*” in the civil rights era. The role of music in conquering fear and recruiting participants is made clear, with unambiguous lines like “*if you don’t go, don’t hinder me*” and “*if my mother don’t go, I’ll go anyhow*” speaking directly to the present dilemma: where this admonishment had once referred to fleeing chattel bondage, to black youth of the 1960s it was still a generational declaration of changing times.

¹³⁷ Unless otherwise noted, all cited selections from the mass meeting of 6 May 1963 are found on the Guy Carawan-produced album *Lest We Forget, Volume 2: Birmingham, Alabama, 1963*, Folkways Records FD 5487.

Cleo Kennedy returns to begin the second side for an emotionally intense solo feature, the nearly ten-minute performance of yet another spiritual, “City Called Heaven.” Of her “slender, almost nasal, and lyrical” soprano voice on this “superb gospel-style treatment,” Bernice Johnson Reagon notes that Kennedy’s impressive technique “heightens this powerful experience in gospel music.”¹³⁸ With the organ as her lone accompaniment, this arrangement was probably borrowed from one of the well-known recorded versions by Mahalia Jackson.

In any case it might be wondered how such an “otherworldly” song, ostensibly about the afterlife, could be prominently featured at a mass meeting that was so urgently facing the very real and present events on earth. What about a “poor pilgrim of sorrow” with “no hope for tomorrow” was meant to inspire faith and confidence in imminent victory against considerable odds? Yet again, the answer can be found in the hidden transcript, with the many stock symbols and metaphors typical of black sacred music.

No less for modern gospel than for old slave spirituals, “heaven” has represented far more than a celestial resting place for wearied, worthy souls. Though the dynamic possibilities of intentions and interpretations were practically limitless, certain key themes are identifiable. Having systematically analyzed hundreds of spirituals over many years of study, John Lovell discerned several meanings of heaven in black sacred song. First of all, since slaves were naturally preoccupied with thoughts of freedom, the common phrase “when I get to heaven” usually (but not always) meant “when I get free.”¹³⁹ Kennedy’s freedom song was clouded in escapist imagery, yet had unseen infrapolitical implications.

Several minutes into it, from somewhere among the congregation, the voice of a young woman commences a series of shrieks and squawks that sharply pierce the air in the packed church. As soon as she starts, a man close to Carawan’s microphone mutters, “Who’s that?” Not all demonstrative outbursts are genuine paroxysms of the Holy Spirit, with many such displays being calculated to draw attention and notoriety onto oneself. Yet whatever this woman’s particular motivation, the other congregants certainly seem unfazed by the startling whoops, screeches, and howls of her ecstatic gospel experience.

¹³⁸ Notes to *Voices of the Civil Rights Movement*, 31.

¹³⁹ On the symbology of “heav’em,” see Lovell, *Black Song*, 342-74.

Some people actually show their approval with matter-of-fact assurances like “It’s alright now.” After all, they are deeply rooted in the Afro-Christian cultural tradition, instinctually aware that the unpredictable nature of the transcendent gospel experience defies rational explanation. And as historian Glenn T. Eskew has suggested, “[T]ranscendence best describes the distinctive quality of the Birmingham movement, for members in the AMCHR, unlike many other civil rights participants, exhibited a Christian fanaticism that enabled them to face the vigilantes and power structure determined to maintain white supremacy.”¹⁴⁰

After a moving address by Dr. King, the mass meeting moves on to the album’s final musical selection, the most gospelized freedom song from the classical Southern period. The gospel song “Ninety-nine and a Half Won’t Do” was popularized by shouting traditional singer Katie Bell Nubin, a traveling evangelist and mother of black gospel icon Sister Rosetta Tharpe. The definitive version was recorded in the fifties by Birmingham’s own Original Gospel Harmonettes, led by the outspoken Dorothy Love Coates, a true gospel legend who was involved in the local movement. With his organ chugging along, creating a surging feeling of forward motion, Carlton Reese leads the choir in a gruff gospel voice on this call-and-response rendition, exhorting listeners to give nothing less than absolute and total commitment to their world-renowned freedom struggle.

The day after the four mass meetings, thousands of demonstrators, mostly young people, invaded the downtown business district. According to a *Newsday* reporter: “Some knelt to pray on the sidewalks. Others marched along the streets, singing freedom songs. Some crowded whites off the sidewalks. ‘We’re marching for freedom!’ they shouted.” Still other demonstrators marched into several downtown stores, sitting on the floor and singing freedom songs in one establishment owned by the most intractable white merchant.¹⁴¹ As the next day’s *Birmingham News* put it: “SIRENS WAIL, HORNS BLOW, NEGROES SING.”¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ Glenn T. Eskew, *But for Birmingham: The Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights Struggle* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 139.

¹⁴¹ Morris, *The Origin of the Civil Rights Movement*, 269-70.

¹⁴² Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 776.

Even within the Birmingham movement itself, with some black business leaders taking a more conservative stance, consensus was hardly guaranteed. However, a real appreciation of African American musical culture was deemed a prerequisite of authenticity. “We all know that you can’t trust a Negro on a negotiating committee who doesn’t like his people’s music,” remarked Andrew Young, who played a key role in the intense negotiating process. “We learned that in Birmingham.”¹⁴³

Aldon Morris concludes that Project C succeeded because of its carefully planned strategy, but he adds two especially critical factors: the “internal cohesion within the SCLC and the black community,” and “the solidifying effect of church culture.” One of the keys to that breakthrough victory was the Birmingham Movement Choir, which performed for forty consecutive nights at mass meetings throughout the city. The unity, energy, and enthusiasm generated by Birmingham’s gospelized movement culture, fully displayed on Carawan’s documentary recording, were crucial to whatever successes were achieved in 1963. As Morris suggests of Miracle Sunday, “[B]lack church culture enabled the demonstrators to win an important victory.”¹⁴⁴

In Birmingham and other local movement struggles, gospel music and the black sacred singing tradition were front and center of every mass meeting, freedom march, and courageous display of people power. Singing encouraged both individual and collective involvement. The use of spirituals and gospel songs was an ideal communication strategy for activists to create group cohesion. Civil rights workers claim that singing ingratiated activists with target communities, and minimized the differences between them and the people they recruited. Because they were a source of familiarity and comfort for African Americans, black sacred songs perfectly suited the needs of organizers seeking to mobilize local people. Pioneering freedom singer and grassroots organizer Cordell Reagon maintained that “music was what held the movement together.”¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ Guy Carawan and Candie Carawan, *Sing for Freedom: The Story of the Civil Rights Movement Through Its Songs* (Montgomery, AL: NewSouth Books, 2007), 186. This book was originally published in two volumes entitled *We Shall Overcome: Songs of the Southern Freedom Movement* (1963), and *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: Songs of the Freedom Movement* (1968).

¹⁴⁴ Morris, *The Origin of the Civil Rights Movement*, 269, 273-4.

¹⁴⁵ Sanger, “*When the Spirit Says Sing!*” 40-2.

Many freedom song lyrics stressed individual effort as well as group cohesion, and the singing form complemented this dual purpose of the words. “Just as the call and response style of singing built a sense of community working together to create a song, the individuality of the participants is also stressed in this style of singing,” explains freedom song scholar Kerran L. Sanger.¹⁴⁶ Encouraging and enabling locals to express themselves and lead the group in singing were a number of dedicated movement songleaders: SNCC had many, while SCLC had the likes of Dorothy Cotton, as well as Reverends Abernathy, Walker, Young, and Shuttlesworth.

Guy Carawan organized a number of freedom song conferences. He helped put one together in 1964 that was jointly sponsored by Highlander, SCLC, and SNCC. By this time, apart from Albany and Birmingham, there were powerful singing movements in Selma, Alabama, parts of Mississippi, and many smaller communities.¹⁴⁷ On a weekend in May, fifty singers and songleaders from seven Southern states assembled in Atlanta for five closed workshops and three concerts open to the public. According to the Carawans’ workshop report, the conference was designed for five reasons: to give singers a chance to hear and learn the basic freedom song repertoire; to afford the opportunity to hear new material from other movements; to provide some understanding of the roots of these songs; to encourage participation of Northern songwriters; and to allow the public to hear the concerts.¹⁴⁸

Some of the weekend’s freedom music was recorded, but it was not made commercially available until released as the third volume of the Folkways *Lest We Forget* series in 1980. Of special note is a solo rendition of the spiritual “Been in the Storm So Long” by Bernice Reagon, whose voice fills the room with a beautiful, reverberating solemnity. Representing the Birmingham movement were Carlton Reese and Cleo Kennedy, who duet on the rousing “Yes, We Want Our Freedom.” With Reese on piano, the song is based on the popular spiritual melody “Wade in the Water.”

An outtake from the conference that surfaced on a 1997 Smithsonian Folkways compilation features more of the gospel piano and voice of Carlton Reese. He performs and teaches to the others what

¹⁴⁶ Sanger, “*When the Spirit Says Sing!*” 43.

¹⁴⁷ Carawan and Carawan, *Sing for Freedom*, xvi.

¹⁴⁸ Notes to album *Lest We Forget, Volume 3: Sing for Freedom*, Folkways Records FD 5488.

Bernice Johnson Reagon describes as “one of several powerful gospel compositions” written by the young leader of the Birmingham Movement Choir: “We’re Marching On to Freedom Land.”¹⁴⁹

The 1980 album of the event’s recordings shares the same name as the conference itself: “Sing for Freedom.” The first track is that uplifting gospel favorite “Up Over My Head,” led by Bettie Mae Fikes of Selma, Alabama. The high school student leader of the Selma Youth Freedom Choir, Fikes is considered “[o]ne of the strongest songleaders to come out of the Movement” by Albany Movement veteran, original SNCC Freedom Singer, and black sacred music scholar and performer, Bernice Johnson Reagon. Whether at freedom song workshops or mass meetings, Fikes sang in a strong, unequivocal gospel style. (A 1963 recording captured her leading a Selma chorus of three hundred in verse after improvised verse of “This Little Light.”) Symbolized by the notorious Sherriff Jim Clark, the Selma campaign was one of the bloodiest of the whole Southern movement—so violent that the 1965 Selma to Montgomery March began with U.S. Army troops surrounding the marchers. “Songs supplied a steady spiritual nourishment throughout the activities of that march,” Reagon explains. “[T]he verses that people fashioned expressed their intentions and reasons for being there.”¹⁵⁰

One of the Smithsonian freedom song collections features another conference outtake, the call-and-response gospel standard “Jesus on the Mainline, Tell Him What You Want.” With the traditional verses altered to reflect current experiences, it is led by another great movement songleader, Sam Block. Originally from the Mississippi Delta town of Cleveland, Block was one of several young men influenced by local “early riser” Amzie Moore.¹⁵¹ Moore joined the NAACP while serving in WWII, and became a dedicated activist when he returned home to the Deep South. From the mid-fifties on, NAACP organizing was Moore’s main focus, with much of his recruiting done in area churches.

These efforts were greatly facilitated by Moore’s membership in several gospel singing groups. According to Mississippi movement chronicler Charles M. Payne, “The minister would give his group—precursors to the SNCC Freedom Singers—a few minutes to sing, after which he would go into his N-

¹⁴⁹ Notes to *Voices of the Civil Rights Movement*, 24.

¹⁵⁰ Reagon, “The Civil Rights Movement,” 621.

¹⁵¹ For “early risers,” see page 39.

Double-A spiel and start passing out membership information.” Especially adept at refocusing church culture content in such settings, Moore would improvise sermons relating contemporary social issues to biblical ones, quoting the Bible (which he usually carried everywhere) with great precision. His main operational base was New Hope Baptist Church, which was burned to the ground after one NAACP meeting was held there in 1955.¹⁵²

It was Cleveland’s Amzie Moore who met, took in, and mentored Bob Moses when he first came to Mississippi scouting for SNCC in the summer of 1960. Though he did not join SNCC, Moore attended one of their Atlanta conferences, where he proposed the organization send students into his state for voter registration drives. Moses returned from New York the following summer of 1961, and went to the town of McComb in southwest Mississippi. That same August, some of the Freedom Riders gravitated to the McComb area after being released from jail. More SNCC members also came and started nonviolent direct-action workshops. Amidst the jailings and beatings of activists (including Moses), Itta Bena, Mississippi, native James Bevel came down from Jackson to address a mass meeting of two hundred. “With his high-pitched voice and shooting-star images,” Taylor Branch writes, “Bevel preached the fire of nonviolent witness.”¹⁵³

Sam Block went to Greenwood in the summer of 1962. SNCC had a policy of recruiting field secretaries from within the state, so many of them were steeped in the region’s deep Afro-Christian cultural traditions. Indeed, the 23-year-old Block was a charismatic songleader that could, as Payne notes, “slip into his ‘preacher’s air’ at will.” For an example of Block’s talents, see “Freedom Train,” a four-and-a-half-minute recording from the 1964 vigil for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party held in Jackson. It features Block leading adapted verses of the staple gospel hymn “The Old Ship of Zion,” interspersed with small sermons from Block in the mode of a shouting preacher. Bernice Johnson Reagon has called Block “a major force in shaping and transforming freedom songs.”¹⁵⁴

¹⁵² Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 33-4.

¹⁵³ Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 498, 500.

¹⁵⁴ Notes to *Voices of the Civil Rights Movement*, 23.

Recruited by Moore, Moses, and Bevel (living with wife Diane Nash and their new daughter in Moore's Cleveland home), Block began in Greenwood much the same as Charles Sherrod and Cordell Reagon had in Albany: by sleeping in cars, hanging around town talking to local people, and teaching freedom songs at small meetings. Many dubious locals mistook Block for a troublemaking Freedom Rider and avoided him. At the first mass meeting, held in a black church, Block taught freedom songs and received the endorsement of a respected Greenwood resident. The following day people were asking him about the next meeting—and especially about those songs. “And I began to see the music itself as an important organizing tool to really bring people together—not only to bring them together but also as the organizational glue to hold them together,” Block reflected. “I started to give people the responsibility of thinking about a song that they would want to sing that night and of changing that song, you know, from a gospel song.”¹⁵⁵

Here, deep in the grassroots gospel community, began one of the great singing movements of the civil rights era. Key to the growth and success of the Greenwood movement was the mutual trust and cooperation between young organizers, local activist networks, and the rank-and-file community folk. And again, black gospel culture played an important role in fostering unity, encouragement, and support.

In August of 1962, SNCC came to the Delta hamlet of Ruleville. Attending a meeting at Williams Chapel Missionary Baptist Church was a 44-year-old local resident named Fannie Lou Hamer. SNCC members including Bob Moses and James Forman informed the local people about their eligibility to vote, and about their ability to use that vote to ameliorate their oppression. Then, in a masterful display of refocusing black church culture, Reverend James Bevel delivered a stirring sermon based on Luke 12:54 entitled “Discerning the Signs of Time.” According to Hamer biographer Chana Kai Lee, the sermon called on everyone to recognize and act upon the signs of the times, “much as one would see clouds forming in the sky and prepare for coming rain.”¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁵ Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 144-7.

¹⁵⁶ Chana Kai Lee, *For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 23-5.

During that meeting, Hamer found further inspiration in the freedom songs. As Lee writes of the experience, “The intense energy and persuasive force expressed through the music reinforced Hamer’s conviction that this would be an important moment in her community’s history.” Traditional sacred songs with such visionary, empowering lyrics “must have sounded like direct personal appeals for a deeply spiritual Hamer to draw on two central motifs of her life: struggle and courage.”¹⁵⁷

A thoroughly church-steeped woman of towering strength and determination, Hamer would go on to be one of the most significant figures of the whole civil rights movement. “Hamer was the epitome of charismatic leadership,” submits historian Christina Greene, “and some observers have suggested her appeal was more powerful than that of King.”¹⁵⁸ More than any single figure in civil rights history, Hamer is known as a movement singer and songleader. Favoring traditional spirituals sung in a robust gospel voice, Hamer invested her emotionally-charged performances with personal experiences of tremendous suffering that commanded respect. The natural earthiness of her singing and oratorical style, documented many times on movement recordings, spoke directly to the Southern gospel communities she labored for many years to organize and mobilize.

According to fellow SNCC colleague Bernice Johnson Reagon, “Hamer’s story is an excellent example of the relationships among living, fighting for freedom, speaking, and singing as a way of evidencing your reality.” For Hamer, there were no distinctions between the various forms of her dynamic activism. “Organizing, talking, singing, and being a human being were all seamless, very unlike the Western tendency toward compartmentalization,” Reagon recalled of her elder friend. “Because one way of participating was songleading, Hamer and her singing colleagues presented a different definition of art and music for contemporary times.”¹⁵⁹ Although this may have been a different definition of art to gospel community outsiders, familiarity and facility with the black sacred singing tradition was second nature to Hamer’s and those raised within it.

¹⁵⁷ Lee, *For Freedom’s Sake*, 26-7.

¹⁵⁸ Christina Greene, “What’s Sex Got to Do with It: Gender and the New Black Freedom Movement Scholarship,” *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (Spring, 2006), 181.

¹⁵⁹ Reagon, “The Civil Rights Movement,” 618.

Substantial numbers of Greenwood blacks were attempting to register by early 1963, spurring even greater levels of white violence. But rather than succumb to the intimidation, SNCC brought in more help and increased voter registration efforts. Henceforth the statewide freedom struggle was centered in Greenwood, another important movement fundamentally shaped by African American church culture. Organizers Sam Block, Willie Peacock, and Hollis Watkins were not only native Mississippians, but they were also effective songleaders grounded in the gospel community traditions essential to grassroots activism. Greenwood mass meetings were powerful social rituals, and “music operated as a kind of litany against fear.” Greenwood was headquarters of the White Citizens’ Council, which was lampooned to the tune of “Jesus Loves Me, This I Know.” In the Greenwood movement, “We Shall Overcome” might jokingly become “*we shall keep the niggers down.*” As always, music was a critical factor in turning curiosity into commitment.¹⁶⁰

If the civil rights movement has seemingly inspired relatively little in terms of films, novels, and plays, Charles Payne rightly insists that the movement “was its own work of art, and mass meetings were among the places where that might most easily be seen.” Of Greenwood in particular, Payne suggests that “[i]f the drudgery of canvassing accounted for much of an organizer’s time on a day-to-day basis, mass meetings, when they were good, were a part of the pay-off, emotionally and politically.”¹⁶¹

A recorded sampling of those mass meetings was thankfully preserved, again by Guy Carawan, and released in conjunction with SNCC on the Folkways album *The Story of Greenwood, Mississippi*. The album revolves around the voice of Bob Moses, who narrates key moments from the Mississippi movement in between testimonies from Greenwood residents (and Hamer), speeches by Dick Gregory and Medgar Evers, chanted sermons and collective prayers, and traditional congregational music. Moses recounts how singing galvanized locals to protest a rash of unpunished shootings: “We sang and we sang and we sang, and people gathered around and finally we sang ‘We Shall Overcome’ in a big circle . . .”¹⁶²

¹⁶⁰ Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 262-3.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 256.

¹⁶² *The Story of Greenwood, Mississippi*, Folkways Records FD 5593. Though the album was released in 1965, the material dates from the height of the Greenwood movement two years earlier.

Although music does not dominate the Greenwood album in allotted time, it did comprise the major portion of mass meetings. Still, the few included snippets do provide some sense of the Greenwood gospel community in action. By the 1960s, a full generation or more into gospel's hegemonic ascent among black churches, gospel culture incorporated nearly all African American religious music—not just its professionalized and commercialized manifestations. Within this extraordinarily diverse agglomeration of black sacred forms, performances ranged anywhere along gospel's wide stylistic continuum: from trained musicians using refined arrangements to untrained vocalists singing in a rough folk manner. Indeed, gospel performance styles varied from region to region, city to city, even church to church.

Historically, blacks of the Mississippi Delta have been the poorest, most poorly educated people, in the poorest state, in the poorest section of the country. Thus it should not be surprising that the small sample of music on the Greenwood album (apart from the Willie Peacock-led freedom songs) ranged closer toward the “primitive” end of the aesthetic spectrum than the more “modern” gospel arrangements of the Birmingham Movement Choir. But with only a brief example to judge—a swelling congregational hymn-prayer led by a singing-chanting preacher—there is a limit to what can musically be gleaned from the album itself.

But it is important to note that these collective moans were nonetheless basic elements of black church services. And this same sacred singing tradition, so deeply embedded in the African American historical experience, has been a vital part of black gospel programs, most of which have been held in churches. It goes without saying—but still bears emphatic repeating—that the close interrelation of form and function between black church services, gospel programs, and mass meetings must be among the least appreciated yet most profoundly significant aspects of the civil rights movement. If it were not for the essentially *gospel* character of the freedom song repertoire, and the widespread “gospelization” of local movement cultures, it is questionable whether the classical Southern movement would have been as effective and successful as it turned out to be.

CHAPTER THREE: THE MOVEMENT IN BLACK GOSPEL

Like the black church, the black gospel community has been stereotyped—justly or not—as conservative, quietist, and escapist. In a word: *otherworldly*. But the same dialectical tensions at work in the Afro-Christian community were of course present among black gospel artists. The innumerable gospel singers from across the country, at every level of notoriety and professional status, possessed the same wide diversity of sociopolitical consciousness and commitment as the rest of the African American population. This chapter profiles major gospel figures and features a variety of postwar gospel records that evinced an open, unambiguous espousal of civil rights support.

Black Gospel Icons and Movement Consciousness

The most significant figure in the early development of gospel music was Charles Albert Tindley (circa 1851-1933). Pastor of a large congregation in Philadelphia, Tindley saw the necessity of providing for the material as well as spiritual needs of the community, especially as increasing numbers of poor blacks migrated to the city. His church became renowned for its social services, including a soup kitchen, youth training and education programs, and a savings unit for home purchases. Tindley was also a preacher of great skill and power. By offering moral guidance along with emotional and practical support, “Tindley Temple” helped members survive their unfamiliar and often desperate urban experience.¹⁶³

The songs of C. A. Tindley were his greatest legacy, a number of which became gospel standards, such as “Stand By Me” (1905) and “We’ll Understand It Better By and By” (1905). “I’ll Overcome Some Day” (1901), among the first of his more than fifty published compositions, became the basis of the civil rights anthem “We Shall Overcome.” His songs were written expressly for black congregations, and attempted to speak directly to them. As one scholar notes, “Tindley’s songs used the musical and verbal language of the poor, struggling, often illiterate Black Christian at the turn of [the twentieth] century.”¹⁶⁴

¹⁶³ Darden, *People Get Ready!*, 160-1; Bernice Johnson Reagon, “Searching For Tindley,” in *We’ll Understand It Better By and By*, 40-3.

¹⁶⁴ Horace Clarence Boyer, “Charles Albert Tindley: Progenitor of African American Gospel Music,” in *We’ll Understand It Better By and By*, 54, 57; Reagon, “Searching For Tindley,” 45.

Tindley Temple was also important in the development of gospel performance style. Though he died while the modern form was still taking shape, Reverend Tindley was a pioneer in encouraging the organization of gospel groups. In turn, the new gospel singers would be responsible for making his music a popular part of the African American sacred song tradition.¹⁶⁵

Another important figure in early gospel was Lucie E. Campbell (1885-1963), the esteemed educator, musical director of the National Baptist Convention, USA, and pioneering gospel songwriter. Campbell was an archetypal representative of the dignified, upstanding, race-conscious Baptist woman of her generation. According to Reverend Charles Walker, who sang in her choirs as a youth, “Her ideas and ideals about Christian womanhood as related to beauty, power, social standing, and behavior represented principles strongly held by Black women involved in educational and church circles during the first half of the twentieth century. These women believed that there was great work to be done in lifting the race and shaping the young.” Campbell worked with women’s organizations and was in great demand as a speaker, frequently substituting for Nannie Helen Burroughs, the most powerful Baptist woman of her time. Several of her songs became gospel standards. Like the songs of Tindley, Campbell’s were popular in the black church because her introspective lyrics spoke to the African American experience of struggle, yet were buoyed by a sense of inner strength to carry on.¹⁶⁶

After the early contributions of Tindley, Campbell, and many others, the acknowledged “father” of modern gospel music was Thomas A. Dorsey (1899-1993). Dorsey became a popular blues and jazz musician in Atlanta before moving to Chicago. By the early thirties, he had committed fully to the nascent gospel movement. For his groundbreaking “gospel blues” compositions, his pioneering role in organizing gospel choirs and choruses, and his foundation of national gospel conventions, Dorsey is considered the most important figure in the development of both the gospel genre and the gospel music industry.

¹⁶⁵ Horace Clarence Boyer, “Charles Albert Tindley: Progenitor of African American Gospel Music,” in *We’ll Understand It Better By and By*, 54, 57; Reagon, “Searching For Tindley,” 45.

¹⁶⁶ Horace Clarence Boyer, “Lucie E. Campbell: Composer for the National Baptist Convention,” in *We’ll Understand It Better By and By*, 106; Darden, *People Get Ready!*, 163; Luvenia A. George, “Lucie E. Campbell: Her Nurturing and Expansion of Gospel Music in the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc.,” in *We’ll Understand It Better By and By*, 116; Charles Walker, “Lucie E. Campbell Williams: A Cultural Biography,” in *We’ll Understand It Better By and By*, 125.

Dorsey was a prolific composer, having written many of the most famous and beloved gospel songs. Anthony Heilbut relates how, during the Great Depression, Dorsey “kept turning out dozens of optimistic songs aimed to lift the spirits of the unemployed laborers and domestics who comprised his audience. The gospel of Tindley and Dorsey talks directly to the poor. In so many words, it’s about rising above poverty while living humble, deserting the ways of the world while retaining its best tunes.” In Dorsey’s own words: “We intended gospel to strike a happy medium for the downtrodden. This music lifted people out of the muck and mire of poverty and loneliness, of being broke, and gave them some kind of hope anyway.”¹⁶⁷ His best known composition (and arguably the greatest gospel song), “Take My Hand, Precious Lord” (1932), was inspired by the death of Dorsey’s wife and newborn child. It was the favorite sacred song of Martin Luther King, who requested its performance in Memphis the night of his murder. Mahalia Jackson sang “Precious Lord” at King’s memorial service, as he had prophetically asked her to do for him years earlier.

Dorsey’s only rival for the title of greatest gospel songwriter was William Herbert Brewster (1897-1987). Branded “Milton to Thomas A. Dorsey’s Shakespeare,” Brewster was “a beautiful example of the progressive impulses nurtured by gospel and developed in the freedom movement.” After earning both Bachelor of Arts and Doctor of Divinity degrees, he moved to Memphis in the 1920s, where he heard and enjoyed that city’s rich blues culture.¹⁶⁸ In Memphis, Brewster was best known as pastor of East Trigg Baptist Church and founder of the Brewster Theological School of Religion. Among the frequent attendees at East Trigg to hear its famed preacher and gospel choir was a young truck driver named Elvis Presley.¹⁶⁹

A civil rights leader in Memphis for over fifty years, Reverend Brewster had a fierce commitment to work for the betterment of his people. “The fight for rights here in Memphis was pretty rough on the Black church,” he recollected. “Before the freedom fights started, before the Martin Luther King days, I had to lead a lot of protest meetings.” Yet, along with more open forms of activism, Brewster recognized

¹⁶⁷ Heilbut, *The Gospel Sound*, 28, 34-5.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 97-8.

¹⁶⁹ Darden, *People Get Ready!*, 175-6.

the infrapolitical significance of his music: “In order to get my message over, there were things that were almost dangerous to say, but you could sing it.”¹⁷⁰

According to Heilbut, “Reverend Brewster himself has always been a political radical.” Brewster wrote books and pamphlets urging “a greater freedom for the black man.” He composed pageant plays commemorating the black freedom struggle, such as *From Auction Block to Glory*. “Irritated by the Uncle Tom gestures of his colleagues,” Heilbut admiringly noted, Brewster’s activist motto became “Out of the Amen Corner onto the Street Corner.” And, Heilbut added, “he freely acknowledges what’s apparent in all his best songs—that the metaphors of progress involve moving up higher in this life as well as the next.” As Brewster himself said, “I always loved challenges, to meet them and extend them.”¹⁷¹

Brewster wrote over two hundred songs, many of which entered the standard gospel repertoire. “I write these songs for the common people who could not understand political language,” Brewster stated, “common people who didn’t know anything about economics, I had to write song after song.”¹⁷² His lyrics drew heavily on familiar black idioms and folklore, blending a conscious literary sensibility with an extraordinary knowledge of the Bible. And if there is any one reason for honoring Brewster, Heilbut suggests, it is because of the social and political messages implicit in his music. “Brewster’s songs were often composed for inclusion in gospel dramas, and frequently these had a political subtext. During a period when civil rights became the dominant national issue, Brewster managed to insinuate themes of social progress and political struggle without turning them into watered-down propaganda, or gospel agitprop.”¹⁷³

Brewster’s encouragement of African American progress was most clearly illustrated in his 1946 masterpiece, “Move On Up a Little Higher,” inspired by the tense race relations in Memphis. “We’ll have to move in the field of education,” he explained. “Move into the professions and move into politics. Move

¹⁷⁰ William Herbert Brewster, “Rememberings: An Interview Conducted and Edited by Bernice Johnson Reagon,” in *We’ll Understand It Better By and By*, 185, 201.

¹⁷¹ Heilbut, *The Gospel Sound*, 98.

¹⁷² Brewster, “Rememberings,” 209.

¹⁷³ Anthony Heilbut, “‘If I Fail, You Tell the World I Tried’: William Herbert Brewster on Records,” in *We’ll Understand It Better By and By*, 234.

in anything that any other race has to have to survive. That was a protest idea and inspiration. I was trying to inspire Black people to move up higher. Don't be satisfied with the mediocre. Don't be satisfied. That was my doctrine." As with black sacred music in general, the embedded messages of "Move On Up a Little Higher" operate primarily on the symbolic level, rather than indulging in explicit protest rhetoric. According to its composer, the song "was not only a Christian climbing the ladder to heaven, but it was an exaltation of Black people to keep moving. You come out of slavery, you have an opportunity to get on your ladder and keep on climbing."¹⁷⁴

Between 1945 and 1960, over fifty Brewster songs were recorded by many gospel performers. In fact, the first million-seller gospel recordings were Brewster compositions: Mahalia Jackson's classic version of "Move On Up a Little Higher" (1947) and "Surely God is Able" by the Ward Singers (1950). But with no church convention, singers' association, or publishing company behind him, Brewster was plagiarized and denied credit for his work on many occasions. Nonetheless, from his desire to reduce divisions and maintain black unity, Brewster never sued. "With the racial situation getting so acute," he reflected, "I haven't bothered too much with any publicity."¹⁷⁵

Brewster became a political force in Memphis, with white candidates wooing him for support. But he dismissed politicians who flirted with black preachers as "political comedians," while giving no assurances of helping the black community. Reverend Brewster was devoted to Dr. King, and saw him on the day of his assassination in Memphis. "Back in the forties, when I'd give plays about Jamestown and Nat Turner, the folks would get so fearful," he recalled. "One thing Dr. King did, he removed some of our folks' fear." Surely, as Heilbut insists, "Reverend Brewster accomplished something similar with his exclamations of progress to victory . . . Brewster's political boldness and courage, combined with his brilliant development of black folk art, is a thrilling realization of the best impulses in gospel. On the strength of his achievement he should be a culture hero of the first rank."¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁴ Brewster, "Rememberings," 201.

¹⁷⁵ Heilbut, *The Gospel Sound*, 101; Heilbut, "If I Fail, You Tell the World I Tried," 234.

¹⁷⁶ Heilbut, *The Gospel Sound*, 104-5.

Another gospel hero, and the most notable graduate of Brewster's theological institute, was Reverend C. L. Franklin (1915-1984). The father of "Lady Soul" Aretha, Franklin was the most famous African American preacher in the country by the 1950s. By far the greatest "gospel preacher" of them all, Franklin whooped, growled, and chanted his powerful sermons in a manner blurring the lines between preacher and performer. According to biographer Nick Salvatore, "Franklin came to understand how the musician and the preacher shared a common tradition and, in a certain manner, a common purpose as well." Indeed, as a religious youth reared in the heart of deep blues country, Franklin grasped that "the Afro-Baptist sermon was, at root, also a musical experience built as much on rhythm as on scripture."¹⁷⁷ Beyond his considerable cultural impact, Franklin was among the black gospel community's staunchest supporters of the civil rights movement.

Clarence LaVaughn Franklin was from the Mississippi Delta. Like Brewster, he was a fan of the blues, and rejected the idea that sacred and secular musics were in conflict. Franklin began his legendary career around his home area before moving to Memphis. At twenty-four, as he developed his musical, intensely rhythmic preaching style, Franklin was already being recognized as "the king of the young whoopers." His prowess and charisma earned him invitations to lead revivals throughout the region and beyond.¹⁷⁸

By 1942 Franklin had his own radio show featuring music and guest speakers to discuss issues of the day. The show attracted a wide audience, and Franklin began addressing broader social and political problems like civil rights and blacks in the war effort. He next moved to Buffalo, New York, for greater financial opportunities. Soon thereafter, he invited A. Philip Randolph to a mass meeting addressing the condition of blacks in postwar America. Franklin had another radio show featuring gospel music and commentary on current events by 1945. That September, in an important step for his career, he was invited to give a major sermon at the annual meeting of the National Baptist Convention in Detroit.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁷ Nick Salvatore, *Singing in a Strange Land: C. L. Franklin, the Black Church, and the Transformation of America* (New York and Boston: Little, Brown and Company: 2005), 31-2.

¹⁷⁸ Salvatore, *Singing in a Strange Land*, 57-8.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 75-6, 98-100.

Less than six months after the convention, Franklin took the pulpit of New Bethel Baptist Church in Detroit, and spent the first two years of his ministry building his reputation and congregation. By 1953 Franklin had built his congregation to 7,800 members, predominantly working-class migrants from the Deep South. With sermons emphasizing human concerns and the transformation of consciousness to overcome deeply embedded fears, his reputation as a dynamic preacher and compassionate pastor spread throughout and beyond Detroit. He again landed a radio show, broadcast live from New Bethel, which became an immediate hit. Franklin began recording LP-length sermons for commercial release in the mid-fifties. The records were an instant sensation, launching a phenomenal recording career that lasted into the 1970s.

In 1955 New Bethel organized its Political Action Guild to sponsor local and national speakers, support political candidates, and engage in voter-registration work. In the following decade, Franklin intensified his political activities and seriously engaged in social problems. “C. L. was a liberal Democrat in his political affiliation,” writes Salvatore, “which for a black Detroit resident in the postwar decades meant advocacy for civil rights legislation, support for the labor movement to the extent it practiced equality within its ranks, and a demand that government at every level create equitable socioeconomic conditions for all citizens.” As his fame grew widely in the 1950s, Franklin also began appearing as a featured presence on gospel music tours.¹⁸⁰

Reverend Franklin was the favorite preacher of Dr. King, who often stopped strategy meetings on Sunday evenings to hear his sermon records broadcast over the radio. Franklin was a friend of King and his father, a prominent Baptist leader in his own right. Franklin helped Mahalia Jackson organize a Chicago program in 1963 that raised \$50,000 for the Birmingham campaign. To support the SCLC and focus attention on racial issues in his own city, he called for a major march in Detroit on June 23, which drew between 125,000 and 200,000 people. King was the main speaker for the demonstration, where he debuted key elements of his iconic “I Have a Dream” speech delivered a few months later.¹⁸¹

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 180-4.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 230, 246-54.

In the following years of exploding urban crisis and growing political divisiveness, Detroit's traditional civil rights leadership was challenged by nationalist militants. Without forsaking cooperation with other factions, Franklin maintained his core beliefs: the rejection of gradualism in achieving black freedom, and the rejection of violence and separatism in attaining it. Fifty years old in 1965, Franklin gradually eased his political activities as the situation worsened and his influence weakened. The 1967 Detroit riot exacerbated the tensions among the city's black leaders and hastened his retreat from the forefront of the political scene. After the death of Dr. King in 1968, Franklin chaired the Detroit branch of the SCLC's ill-fated Poor People's Campaign.¹⁸² "Franklin preached to raise consciousness—of self and of one's relation to society," concludes Salvatore. "His faith encouraged individuals in his audiences to assert in private and in public that they were, in fact, somebody. This was Franklin's power. It remains his legacy."¹⁸³

Franklin's dear friend Mahalia Jackson (probably 1912-1972) was not only the "World's Greatest Gospel Singer," whose name is synonymous with gospel's golden age. More than Franklin or any other gospel star, Jackson is popularly recognized as the most open and consistently supportive ally of the postwar freedom struggle. A "larger-than-life figure, an icon, an Earth Mother with a once-in-a-lifetime presence and voice,"¹⁸⁴ Jackson rarely refused to lend her enormous prestige to any just cause. But her tireless efforts on behalf of the civil rights movement—not least for Dr. King and his SCLC—were unsurpassed among the black gospel elite.

After leaving school in the eighth grade, Jackson worked as a laundress and nursemaid in her native New Orleans before joining the Northern exodus in 1928 at age sixteen. She was singing leads in the Greater Salem Baptist Church within months of arrival. "In Chicago, our people were advancing," Jackson remembered of those early days. "Not only were they making money; they were active in clubs and all sorts of organizations. . . . The people were church people, but they were talking about different things than we ever did down south—things like getting educated and going into business. The Negro was

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 286-7.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 317.

¹⁸⁴ Darden, *People Get Ready!*, 210.

doing more than just singing and praying, and I began to see a new world.” In this heady atmosphere, she also realized for the first time “that southern whites had a chain on the colored people.”¹⁸⁵

It was during this same period that Jackson first became politically active. She began as a fervent voice for African American Democrat Louie B. Anderson’s successful aldermanic campaign. In the summer of 1932 she sang at many meetings for Alderman William L. Dawson, who was running for Congress. That same year, Jackson “worked hard for [Franklin D.] Roosevelt” by visiting the heavily Republican districts around black Chicago. Dawson, who started as a Republican, switched parties “and turned that whole ward.”¹⁸⁶ Jackson would remain a staunch Democrat her whole life.

In 1946 she signed with the small New York label Apollo Records. When Apollo was ready to drop her after the initial releases fared poorly, a producer gave Jackson one more chance with Reverend Brewster’s “Move On Up a Little Higher,” a warm-up number from her repertoire. The song was an immediate smash in early 1948, becoming gospel’s first million-selling release and making Jackson a virtual overnight superstar. Uplifting Brewster songs “Just Over the Hill” and “How I Got Over” followed with great success. “The Apollo albums in particular are classics,” writes Robert Darden, “untouchable renditions of gospel songs by a voice in the prime of its power and command.”¹⁸⁷ She was equally effective on slow hymns and harder shout numbers. With little exaggeration, Heilbut proffers that Jackson’s power on records and in person “was downright terrifying.”¹⁸⁸

Two decades of unparalleled gospel success and acclaim followed. In 1954 Jackson had her own popular radio and television programs in Chicago, but CBS feared that “no national sponsor would touch a show that went South with a black as its star.”¹⁸⁹ That year she left Apollo and signed with industry giant Columbia Records, which promoted Jackson with the sobriquet “World’s Greatest Gospel Singer.” This prosperity allowed her to purchase a home in the white suburbs. Block meetings were held to protest her moving in, threatening phone calls were made, and bullets riddled her window while she was singing

¹⁸⁵ Mahalia Jackson with Evan McLeod Wylie, *Movin’ On Up* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1966), 48-9.

¹⁸⁶ Laurraine Goreau, *Just Mahalia, Baby: The Mahalia Jackson Story* (Gretna, LA: Pelican, 1975), 58-62.

¹⁸⁷ Darden, *People Get Ready!*, 216.

¹⁸⁸ Heilbut, *The Gospel Sound*, 64-6.

¹⁸⁹ Goreau, *Just Mahalia, Baby*, 195.

out of town. Whites would move away, but Jackson stood her ground and stayed in the neighborhood, blazing social as well as cultural trails for others to follow.

Jackson continued supporting Democratic politics. She formed a durable alliance with Mayor Richard Daley—a mutually beneficial political relationship as much as a genuine personal friendship. When singing for the National Baptist Convention in Denver, Jackson met two young ministers: Ralph D. Abernathy and Martin Luther King, Jr. She gladly accepted their invitation to sing at a rally and raise money for their Montgomery Improvement Association. (Free of charge, for as she said: “I don’t charge the walking people.”) For three days Jackson stayed in the Abernathy home, harassed and menaced by white locals, but she attended several meetings and performed for an overflowing church concert. “Hearing Mahalia this night,” writes friend and biographer Laurraine Goreau, “[King] would tell her he now knew fully what gospel music meant.” Not long after Jackson left Montgomery, a bomb shattered Abernathy’s front bedroom where she and her accompanist had slept.¹⁹⁰

Dr. King and Jackson became good friends. When in Chicago, he and his advisors would come to her house to eat, relax, and hold meetings (“Our second home,” Abernathy called it). Before 35,000 people at the Lincoln Memorial on May 17, 1957, after King’s first national speech, Jackson sang the old spiritual “I Been ’Buked, I Been Scorned” at the Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom. She also sang “The Star-Spangled Banner” at President John F. Kennedy’s star-studded inauguration gala in 1961, sitting on the President’s platform as an official Distinguished Guest. A week later, Jackson again sang the national anthem at a Carnegie Hall benefit concert for the SCLC. Indeed, she would take part in many fund-raising and consciousness-raising events for the civil rights movement. Jackson herself organized a Chicago program for the Birmingham campaign in May of 1963. “Chicago is just as much a segregated city as Birmingham,” King frankly declared in his address. “You must defeat segregation and discrimination in Chicago.” Sealed by Aretha Franklin singing “Take My Hand, Precious Lord,” the sellout concert raised a desperately needed \$50,000 for the SCLC.¹⁹¹

¹⁹⁰ Goreau, *Just Mahalia, Baby*, 215-21; Jackson, *Movin’ On Up*, 123-5.

¹⁹¹ Darden, *People Get Ready!*, 219; Goreau, *Just Mahalia, Baby*, 231, 284-7, 315, 347-52.

On September 25, 1963, Jackson recorded a version of “We Shall Overcome,” which had become a regular feature of her concert sets. A month later, the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom became the symbolic pinnacle of the hopeful, nonviolent, integrationist phase of the postwar freedom struggle. “Everywhere there was a spirit of happy, joyous celebration as if the day of Jubilee had come,” she recalled. “It had me dazzled. It filled me with pride and made me feel so uplifted that I was brimming over ready to shed tears and laugh at the same time.” Her featured appearance immediately preceded Dr. King’s climactic speech. She had originally planned to sing “Precious Lord,” but at the last moment King suggested that she again do “I Been ’Buked.” With her new hat pinned tight on her head so she could let herself go, Jackson took the crowd of more than 200,000 integrated demonstrators straight to the black church. “As I sang the words I heard a great murmur come rolling back to me from the multitude below and I sensed I had reached out and touched a chord,” she remembered of that performance. “I was moved to shout for joy. I lifted up the beat of the rhythm to a gospel beat.”¹⁹²

Jackson clapped and swayed as the vast throng joined her. According to Goreau: “Singing it into the maze of mikes, into America, out to the crowd, it was not hurt of the past but the now of the future that brought tears of joy to her voice so the vast, restless crowd became one listening body, rapt, intent.” She even overpowered the roar of a low-flying plane overhead. People cried for more when Jackson finished, so she rocked them with Brewster’s “How I Got Over.” Panting and dripping with sweat, she received a massive ovation before relinquishing the stage to her minister friend.¹⁹³

One source later claimed it was actually Jackson who suggested to King that he include the riff she had heard him use at C. L. Franklin’s Detroit march. “Tell them about the dream, Martin,” she supposedly said to King as he spoke. If true, then he evidently agreed, changed his prepared address, and delivered arguably the greatest piece of oratory in American history.¹⁹⁴

Jackson continued contributing to the movement after this glorious, optimistic high point, mostly by appearing for rallies and fundraisers. In March 1965, Jackson sent President Lyndon Johnson an

¹⁹² Jackson, *Movin’ On Up*, 192-8.

¹⁹³ Goreau, *Just Mahalia, Baby*, 358.

¹⁹⁴ Darden, *People Get Ready!*, 219. The source is activist Ben Hooks.

emotional telegram begging him to protect the civil rights demonstrators in Selma. The next year, Dr. King shifted focus onto the slums of Chicago, and naturally sought Jackson for help and advice. Forty thousand people at Soldier Field heard King's three-point rally cry for open housing, for equal justice, and for better jobs. A series of mass marches through white neighborhoods were confronted by angry mobs with rocks, bricks, and swastikas.¹⁹⁵

Failing health and personal problems dogged Jackson's later years, but she stayed active by performing, working with King, and trying to found her own Chicago "temple" for the disadvantaged. She had told Dr. King that she would be in Memphis for his meeting on Thursday, April 4, 1968, the date of his murder. At King's funeral services, before a congregation of some 1,300 friends, dignitaries, and celebrities, Jackson fulfilled a promise by singing his favorite gospel song: Dorsey's "Take My Hand, Precious Lord." Less than four years later, Jackson died at the age of sixty. Coretta King gave a touching eulogy at her funeral, calling Jackson a "friend of mankind" and a "woman with extraordinary gifts as a singer, singing songs, of her people." Aretha Franklin closed the service for her departed friend with, of course, "Precious Lord."¹⁹⁶

"Don't you knock the black woman," Jackson once scolded an audience, as if in reply to certain critics. Pointing out her own contributions to the civil rights movement, as well as those of black women overall, she added: "you know who brought Martin Luther King to Chicago when all the *Negro* ministers were too scared? It was a *black* woman, *me*."¹⁹⁷ Jackson's life was symbolic of the indispensable and underappreciated role of women in the black freedom struggle. From luminaries of the "matriarch" model Septima Clark, Ella Baker, and Fannie Lou Hamer, to younger activists like Diane Nash and Ruby Doris Smith Robinson, African American women were at least equally active in the struggle—even if they were often relegated to menial work and subordinated by the male-dominated movement culture.

Thus, at the forefront of gospel's engagement with the civil rights movement, it should not be surprising to find two exceptionally strong black women. Because of her extraordinary level of fame,

¹⁹⁵ Goreau, *Just Mahalia, Baby*, 406, 427-8

¹⁹⁶ Darden, *People Get Ready!*, 220.

¹⁹⁷ Heilbut, *The Gospel Sound*, 72.

Jackson is the best known freedom fighter among the black gospel elite. Though far less recognized than the internationally celebrated Jackson, the second woman was another giant of the genre and even more outspoken and personally committed to the movement: the indefatigable Dorothy Love Coates (1929-2002).

Born Dorothy McGriff in the important gospel city of Birmingham, she lived there most of her life. “Why not?” she pointedly asked. “I’ve stayed in the North. It’s the same everywhere, if you look like me.” Forced to drop out of high school, Dorothy worked “all the standard Negro jobs”—scrubbing floors, clerking at laundries and dry cleaning shops—while singing gospel at night. She became seriously ill while pregnant with her first child; her daughter was born with cerebral palsy and epilepsy, leaving Dorothy prostrate with grief for months. “By her early twenties Dorothy had experienced enough bad times to defeat anyone,” Heilbut wrote. “Divorced from her husband, penniless and vocally weakened by her illness, she kept going sustained only by her family and the idea of gospel; ultimately the two became synonymous.”¹⁹⁸

Dorothy joined the all-female Gospel Harmonettes in 1951, just as the group was set to make its first recordings for the independent Specialty label in Los Angeles. The Harmonettes released a string of thrilling records during the golden age fifties, and Dorothy emerged as a leading gospel artist of the era. Classic recordings include the traditional “No Hiding Place,” covers of Lucie Campbell, Thomas Dorsey, and W. H. Brewster songs, and a wealth of original material, including “You Must Be Born Again,” “I Wouldn’t Mind Dying,” and “(You Can’t Hurry God) He’s Right On Time,” the origin of the Supremes 1966 number-one hit “You Can’t Hurry Love.” Like Brewster, she was copied but rarely compensated.

Heilbut praised Coates as “a gifted songwriter, perhaps the only one attuned to political realities,” and rightly suggested she was deserving of far greater status in American culture. “Instead,” he insisted, “for thousands of black people, she is *the* message singer, the only one they can trust.”¹⁹⁹ As Darden put

¹⁹⁸ Heilbut, *The Gospel Sound*, 160-3; Anita Bernadette McAllister, “The Musical Legacy of Dorothy Love Coates: African American Female Gospel Singer with Implications for Education and Theater Education” (PhD. dissertation, Kansas State University, 1995), 29-30.

¹⁹⁹ Heilbut, *The Gospel Sound*, 159.

it, “She wrote eloquently and angrily about man’s inhumanity to man—and about a heavenly home that awaited those who persevered.”²⁰⁰ Dorothy’s core lyrical themes revolved around courage, determination, religious faith, and moral strength. But her music was fully appreciated only within the context of her imposing physical presence and inspired performance style. During and between numbers, she often employed spoken narrative devices to communicate her encouragement or condemnation.

With cover versions by Ray Charles, Johnny Cash, and numerous gospel artists, the most popular of Dorothy’s classic Harmonettes recordings is probably “That’s Enough.” Heilbut suggests that “in its mixture of paranoia and self-assurance,” the song is the story of Dorothy’s life:

*There’s always somebody talking about me,
Really I don’t mind.
They’re trying to block and stop my progress,
Most of the time.
The mean things you say don’t make me feel bad,
I can’t miss a friend that I’ve never had,
I’ve got Jesus and that’s enough.*

If not quite the “blistering attack on lynching and violence” that Darden calls it, “That’s Enough” was definitely “one of the first songs to tackle sensitive subjects head-on.”²⁰¹

The Original Gospel Harmonettes retired in 1958. When Coates reorganized the group in 1961, she retained two original members and added her younger sister Lillian, as well as a soprano named Cleo Kennedy, the young soloist of the Birmingham Movement Choir. Without any evident publicity or fanfare, Coates threw herself into the local movement during these critical few years. According to Heilbut, “Dorothy had always been race-conscious, but the civil rights movement fired her imagination like nothing since she’d first heard gospel.” It seems not much is known beyond his sparse description of her apparently serious commitment: “She began working with Martin Luther King, marching down Birmingham streets, and sleeping in jail.”²⁰²

Reverend Erskine Faush, the same Birmingham radio personality who cued mass demonstrations by playing gospel records, remarked how “Dorothy has always given her public a thirst for freedom.”

²⁰⁰ Darden, *People Get Ready!*, 252.

²⁰¹ Darden, *People Get Ready!*, 253; Heilbut, *The Gospel Sound*, 163.

²⁰² Heilbut, *The Gospel Sound*, 165.

Faush recalled that Coates “has been at the front of the line singing freedom songs and participating at rallies. She has walked with Martin Luther King, and sang his favorite song, ‘Precious Lord’ many times. She went to churches to encourage people to vote.” Faush, who with other popular black deejays played an unusually prominent role encouraging the Birmingham struggle, even went so far as to say that Coates was “very instrumental in the civil rights movement.”²⁰³

She may not have organized celebrity galas to raise tens of thousands of dollars for the SCLC’s Birmingham battle, but Coates was actually there in the streets and churches of her native city, marching, going to jail, working for voter registration—and of course singing for freedom. “Now when she sang in church, her moans were very specific,” Heilbut suggested in reference to the refocusing of church culture content and the opening of the hidden transcript in unsettled times. “Not merely was this ‘a mean old trouble land,’ it was a place where ‘our children can’t go to decent schools,’ and women like her mother grew middle-aged at thirty.”²⁰⁴

One of the classic Harmonettes recordings from the 1950s, Dorothy’s definitive version of the exhortative gospel song “Ninety-nine and a Half,” most likely served as the template for Carlton Reese’s own arrangement of the song for the ACMHR Choir. (Indeed, considering the close-knit character of the local gospel community—as well as Dorothy’s dominating, if nurturing position within it—they were probably close associates.) If there was an official anthem of the Birmingham “singing movement,” surely it was this song demanding nothing less than all-out commitment. “The hundred percent Coates demands renders the distinction between spiritual and political meaningless,” writes Craig Werner. “Living right and attending to your soul requires awareness of the people around you. And awareness requires action.”²⁰⁵

When it came to real action and personal sacrifice at the grassroots level, no major gospel figure was more committed to the freedom struggle than Coates. “The Lord has blessed our going out and our

²⁰³ McAllister, “The Musical Legacy of Dorothy Love Coates,” 75.

²⁰⁴ Heilbut, *The Gospel Sound*, 165.

²⁰⁵ Craig Werner, *A Change Is Gonna Come: Music, Race and the Soul of America* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2006), 96.

coming in,” she would tell an audience. “He’s blessed our sitting in, too.” She carried on her gospel mission through the sixties, singing and writing songs and continuing to address social conditions. Coates rebuked the hate mongering of black power propagandists as well as white segregationists. Her narrations might detail Southern employment statistics or the number of blacks hired by local businesses. She talked about “deserted wives, unemployed fathers, [and] sons dying in Vietnam for rights denied them at home.” According to Heilbut, “She sees reasons for racial unrest all over.” And she saw it up close, having had a harrowing experience in the 1967 Newark riot.²⁰⁶

“Despite all her dedication,” Heilbut noted of his friend, “Dorothy is often angry and bitter.”²⁰⁷ For too many years Coates was exploited by stingy record companies, unscrupulous promoters, and other artists expropriating her material without credit or compensation. Understandably, all the greed, betrayal, and hypocrisy she encountered soured her on people in general. Nevertheless her religious faith never wavered, nor did her love of gospel music, so Coates kept going and stayed active into the 1990s.

Apart from Dorothy Love Coates, the only major gospel singer to speak out in the 1950s was Reverend Julius Cheeks (1929-1981). Born in Spartanburg, South Carolina, Cheeks was one of thirteen children raised in desperate poverty by a widowed mother. He picked cotton to survive, and with only a second grade education he remained illiterate all his life. By the 1940s, the teenaged Cheeks was still picking cotton while singing with a local group. About 1946 he joined the Nightingales, and they signed with the independent Peacock label in 1952. The unit soon became the Sensational Nightingales, due largely to the talents of Cheeks, and they had a strong run as one of the top quartets of the fifties. Known primarily for his heavy, throat-butchering screams and energetic engagement with audiences, Cheeks was widely regarded the “hardest worker in quartet history.”²⁰⁸

Besides being a hard-working performer, as well as a gifted vocalist, writer, and arranger, Cheeks “was also attacking the enemies of ‘our people,’ while more timid groups would sing about ‘doors slammed in your face,’ and ‘stumbling blocks in your way.’” As with Coates, details concerning his

²⁰⁶ Heilbut, *The Gospel Sound*, 167

²⁰⁷ Darden, *People Get Ready!*, 254; Heilbut, *The Gospel Sound*, 168.

²⁰⁸ Heilbut, *The Gospel Sound*, 122-4.

politics are lacking beyond the few vague mentions by Heilbut. About all we learn is that Cheeks “fought segregation all through the fifties,” or that he and Coates “never forgot the conditions back home” and “spoke about lynchings and bombed schools and segregated facilities.” Cheeks, the illiterate former cotton picker, did make clear his hatred of the South, citing his struggling siblings, including two veteran brothers. He even left post-mortem instructions that his body not be carried below a certain bridge in Baltimore; when he died, Reverend Cheeks was buried in Newark.²⁰⁹

Seemingly, after Brewster the composer, Franklin the preacher, and singers Jackson, Coates, and Cheeks, the search for civil rights gospel figures dries up and the trail goes cold. Of course this account does not include former gospel artists who crossed over to the secular music world. Sam Cooke, a gospel idol with the Soul Stirrers before going pop in the late 1950s, composed and recorded his iconic song of hope “A Change Is Gonna Come” (with the most controversial verse redacted for radio airplay) shortly before his tragic death in 1964.

The next year, popular family group the Staple Singers released their album *Freedom Highway*, inspired by the recent Selma to Montgomery March. Founded by patriarch Roebuck “Pops” Staples and led by the voice of daughter Mavis, the Staples went from downhome gospel in the 1950s to folk-gospel in the 1960s to gospel-soul by the early 1970s. They met Dr. King in the early sixties, and the group actively joined the movement by traveling with him and appearing at fundraisers. But the group’s greatest contribution was their signature “message” music. Recorded live in a church with a driving band, the 1965 album’s title track “Freedom Highway” features Mavis delivering the familiar Staples message of brotherhood:

*There is just one thing
I can't understand my friend
Why some folk think freedom
Is not designed for all men*

Pops wrote “Why? (Am I Treated So Bad)” in reaction to television coverage of the 1957 “Little Rock Nine” crisis at Central High School. On a 1966 recording, supported by the crooning of the three

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 126-30, 297.

Staples sisters and his own bluesy guitar picking, Pops comes off like a country preacher as he sermonizes this ponderous freedom song: “My friends, you know this old world’s in a bad condition . . .” It became a favorite of King’s, regularly sung by his special request at movement functions.²¹⁰

Despite crossover success on the Stax label, Pops insisted that the Staple Singers never really left the gospel field. They were a significant part of the classic soul phenomenon, but the Staples were only one example of the fundamental relation between soul and gospel. Sam Cooke, who did leave gospel stardom for secular fame, was perhaps the most important figure in the development of the soul form bred directly from the black church tradition. Probably without exception, and like most blacks of the time, soul singers got their formative musical experience in the gospel church. And the most socially conscious, civil rights-oriented artists of the soul genre performed gospel before their secular careers took flight. Curtis Mayfield of the Impressions—“Keep On Pushing” (1964), “People Get Ready” (1965), and “We’re a Winner” (1968)—was a member of the Northern Jubilee Gospel Singers in the fifties. Likewise, James Brown sang with the Gospel Starlighters long before “Say It Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud” became an African American anthem in 1968. By then, the gospel-drenched civil rights movement had made such declarations much safer for black people to say so loudly and proudly in America.

Black Gospel Records and the Postwar Freedom Struggle

Throughout the classical Southern phase of the postwar freedom struggle, black gospel was the common denominator among the often overlapping types of movement music: contemporary soul, old spirituals and traditional hymns, and the new freedom songs were all expressed within a basically gospelized framework. The uplifting, participatory nature of gospel made it the ideal cultural tool for movement purposes, and many of the most popular freedom songs were adapted gospel tunes. But in the long tradition of African American sacred music, gospel itself very rarely addressed sociopolitical matters in an explicit, unambiguous manner.

²¹⁰ The Staple Singers, *Freedom Highway*, Columbia/Legacy compact disc CK 47334. Originally released on Epic in 1965 as a live in-church session, this 1991 reissue includes only two of the original LP tracks supplemented by sixteen Epic recordings from the latter sixties.

While the black religious experience was its main focus, gospel music was a multivalent song form bearing different meanings for different people at different times in different contexts. Almost exclusively, the protest content of gospel lyrics was obscured within the hidden transcript of biblical symbolism, giving the surface impression of an escapist worldview detached from the problematic concerns of the here and now. Yet if even so outspoken and committed a figure as Dorothy Love Coates only obliquely referred to controversial subjects in her own music, and overwhelmingly emphasized God, sin and salvation, the militancy or activist efforts of individual gospel artists can hardly be deduced from a straightforward interpretation of their recorded songs alone.

However, in many if not most cases of the hidden transcript, transformative historical periods—“unsettled times”—have afforded greater opportunity for more public expressions of cultural protest to emerge. The postwar era was certainly this kind of period, and black gospel was certainly no exception in its increased production of overtly political recordings. But even during the peak movement years, such records represented only a tiny fraction of all gospel releases. Gospel’s putatively “apolitical” nature might help explain this dearth of explicit protest records, were it not for the fact that black secular artists showed little more evidence of speaking out than their sacred counterparts. Only after the watershed achievements of the mid-1960s did African American musicians of any kind routinely address issues of racial injustice and civil rights protest in their work. As historian Guido van Rijn suggests, “not to do so, at least occasionally, probably risked commercial ruin at a time of fierce black pride and heightened racial consciousness.”²¹¹

Until the end of the sixties, before the movement made it relatively safe for the Staples Singers to cut a song like “Freedom Highway” at mid-decade, the perceived risk in recording political material was deemed too high by record companies. And as Rijn reasonably suggests, there was no guarantee of a public airing for those songs that were recorded: “fears of possible reprisals, doubts about their commercial appeal, and the certain knowledge that even if they avoided a formal ban, they would not get airplay on the radio, combined to ensure that many civil rights blues and gospel songs remain unissued.”

²¹¹ Rijn, “Climbing the Mountain Top,” 139.

It was on account of those risks that records with an overt civil rights agenda, particularly by blues artists, “were recorded in Europe, or for tiny labels with niche—usually black—audiences, or for labels with a left-wing philosophy and progressive racial politics.” Rijn found that a disproportionate number of these records were made for black-owned labels, given their underrepresentation in the industry; presumably, since African American label owners had more personal stake in the movement, they “were more willing to go out on a limb to record potentially controversial material.”²¹²

Black religious recordings had been addressing the social conditions of African Americans since the 1920s. With consistent themes like man’s downfall and hell-bound trains of death, popular preachers such as Reverend J. M. Gates of Atlanta whooped moral messages about negotiating the dangers of the urban environment. But as Jonathan L. Walton suggests, “there may have been deeper meaning encoded within the sermons that connected with listeners on multiple discursive levels.” Walton recognizes that sermons centering on the biblical premise that “the last shall be first and the first shall be last” involved more than “pie-in-the-sky” pipedreams or “otherworldly” theodicy. Despite the overgeneralizations of too many critics, Walton argues that Old Testament slavery and deliverance of the Israelites, as well as the New Testament compassion and suffering of Jesus, continued to resonate for the black community, particularly regarding divine intervention in human affairs. “This theological tradition points to why one might surmise that there was little need for preachers to broach racial and economic injustice directly on records when recounting biblical narratives that demonstrate how God’s justice brings wrath to the wicked while comforting the poor and oppressed,” Walton explains. “For black Christians familiar with the evils of racial oppression, terrorized by the practice of lynching in the South, and trapped in the quicksand of a sinking pre-Depression economy, a message of divine reversal had resonant meaning on both cultural and personal levels.”²¹³

With reason, record companies believed that the often pedantic nature of explicit “message” recordings lacked the broader consumer appeal of sermons with familiar biblical narratives and simple,

²¹² *Ibid.*, 139-40.

²¹³ Jonathan L. Walton, “The Preachers’ Blues: Religious Race Records and Claims of Authority on Wax,” *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (Summer 2010), 210-2.

largely open-ended conclusions.²¹⁴ Hence, on religious “race” records, sociopolitical messages would almost always operate within the infrapolitical realm of the hidden transcript. This would remain so with black gospel recordings until the latter 1960s, as social commentary greatly increased toward the end of that tumultuous decade. Up to this extraordinarily “unsettled” time of war, riots, and assassinations, African American protest was heavily dependent on allusion and metaphor.

Rijn found that only about one percent of all blues and gospel records released before WWII contained any overt political comment. In any case, Rijn says, “Even those songs that did embrace overtly political themes rarely gave formal expression to any particular ideology, and few advocated, or denounced, specific programs and solutions associated with Roosevelt’s New Deal.” The Depression, which was responsible for a decrease in total race record production, did occasion a rise in “political” songs about the hard times that must have provided some much-needed temporary relief for struggling black listeners. Fire and brimstone sermon records continued to be prevalent throughout the 1930s, addressing everything from breadlines to federal work projects and relief programs.²¹⁵

President Roosevelt was generally perceived as a friend of the African American community, and a few black artists like Mahalia Jackson had supported him as early as 1932. Reflecting the early shift from the Republican to Democratic camp, some black records were complimentary of the President’s policies during the thirties and patriotically supportive during the war in the forties. The foremost tribute to Roosevelt was paid by a Florida singer, songwriter, disc jockey, and promoter named Otis Jackson (1911-1962). His composition “Tell Me Why You Like Roosevelt” was recorded at least seven times between 1946 and 1972, first by Jackson as member of a male vocal group called the Evangelist Singers. It was covered by two other gospel groups in 1947, and then rerecorded in 1949 by Jackson with the National Clouds of Joy, which became the best known version.²¹⁶

²¹⁴ Walton, “Religious Race Records and Claims of Authority on Wax,” 219-20.

²¹⁵ Rijn, “Climbing the Mountain Top,” 122; Guido van Rijn, *Roosevelt’s Blues: African-American Blues and Gospel Songs on FDR* (Jackson: University Press Of Mississippi, 1997), 207.

²¹⁶ Rijn, *Roosevelt’s Blues*, 197. Recorded for the independent Gotham label, the 1949 version is available on a 1988 compilation called *Get Right With God: Hot Gospel*, Gospel Heritage compact disc HTCD 01.

The song's portrayal of the highborn FDR as an ally of common people is repeated in the call-and-response chorus: "Tell me why you like Roosevelt / He wasn't no kin / Great God Almighty, he was a poor man's friend." Over the low hum of the group's rhythmic backdrop, Jackson delivers an eloquent, two-sided gospel rap summarizing FDR's importance to blacks. The record recounts the President's mournful death, compares him to the liberator Lincoln, and lauds his appointment of the first "Negro general" in American history. As Rijn concludes, "The song shows how Roosevelt advanced Negroes in different fields and explains how the Roosevelt myth arose." Significantly, though victory was achieved in the war overseas, Jackson presciently alludes to the sobering fact that back home "our problems have just begun."²¹⁷

Indeed, this was evident as African American servicemen like Medgar Evers and Amzie Moore returned to the ubiquitous "Whites Only" signs in the stubbornly segregated South. White New Yorker Ervin Drake penned "No Restricted Signs (Up in Heaven)" and took it to Johnny Mercer at Capitol Records. "I didn't want it to seem like a 'message' song," claimed Drake, "so I did it with a boogie-woogie tempo and very conversationally." Mercer wanted to cut it, but his reticent partner warned: "John, the way things are in this country, if you record that song, we'll lose our Southern distributorship." It was recorded by the Golden Gate Quartet, the most influential and commercially successful black gospel group of its time, and released by Columbia in 1947. The Gates, who broke a number of barriers and had achieved national notoriety by the late 1930s, also risked jeopardizing their mainstream popularity by making the record. The group had even appeared at Roosevelt's third inauguration—but they recorded it anyway. The lyrics, sung again in a rhythmic rap style, depict a welcoming St. Peter leading folks through the Pearly Gates to witness "snow white angels, colored angels, Sons of David and Chinese" coexisting together in eternal paradise.²¹⁸

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 199-200.

²¹⁸ The original Columbia recording of "No Restricted Signs" is available on the three-disc Time-Life collection from 2009, *Let Freedom Sing: The Music of the Civil Rights Movement*, Time-Life/Universal Music 80051 D/A732990/B0012352-02. The quote is from the accompanying notes to *Let Freedom Sing*, 6-7.

A small handful of political gospel records were released during the late forties and early fifties, covering such topics as the Korean War and the awful destructive power of the new atomic bomb. A notably overt example of early civil rights gospel came with the December 1950 recording of “I’m So Grateful to the NAACP” by the Gospel Pilgrims, another group led by composer Otis Jackson. This song celebrates the organization’s help in the recent case of three black men “saved from the electric chair” following their dubious conviction of raping a white woman in Jackson’s home state of Florida. It was released on Atlantic Records, the New York label of brothers Ahmet and Neshui Ertegun, one of the few commercial record companies to take a stand on racial issues at that time. Rijn cites this as another example of how “the enlightened views of the label owners were significant in providing the environment within which such a song could be recorded and released.”²¹⁹

In 1952, Atlanta gospel group the Echoes of Zion recorded an adapted version of the traditional black church song “Keep Still ‘God Will Fight Your Battles.’” Released on the local Gerald label, with composition credits to one “Harrison Smith,” the record outlines the African American contribution to United States military history from the Boston Massacre to the contemporary Korean War. By the fourth verse, while black men were away “fighting to keep the Reds on the run” in the early Cold War, there is pointed mention of “a great massacre” in Georgia and the bombing of “our homes” in Florida. The next verse serves America a prophetic notice: “*Their blood has flowed in foreign lands / They’re coming home to take a stand.*” Anticipating Dr. King’s maxim that “the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice,” the final couplet assures that “cruel men may say or do what they may, but the righteous will see a better day.” As Rijn notes, black gospel records like “No Restricted Signs,” “I’m So Grateful to the NAACP” and “Keep Still ‘God Will Fight Your Battles’” presented a “quantitatively modest, but qualitatively impressive musical response to the struggle for African-American freedom, and one which is probably the visible and audible sign of a larger body of unrecorded protest songs.”²²⁰

²¹⁹ Guido van Rijn, *The Truman and Eisenhower Blues: African-American Blues and Gospel Songs, 1945-1960* (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 64-6.

²²⁰ Rijn, *The Truman and Eisenhower Blues*, 67-8.

Yet another Otis Jackson composition was inspired by the death of revered educator and pioneering civil rights advocate Mary McLeod Bethune. In 1955, accompanied by elite quartet the Dixie Hummingbirds, Jackson recorded “The Life Story of Madame Bethune.” The record was made for the Hummingbirds’ label, Peacock Records in Houston. Besides being a popular gospel figure around Bethune’s native Florida, Jackson worked as a volunteer for the Jacksonville NAACP, not far from her home. Because this friend and political ally of Eleanor Roosevelt was not widely perceived as “militant” by whites, Rijn is right to suggest that Peacock “probably felt little risk in issuing this gospel eulogy” to Madame Bethune.²²¹

The murder of black teenager Emmett Till in the summer of 1955 was a landmark event in the postwar freedom struggle. Late that year, Detroit gospel singer and preacher Brother Will Hairston (1919-1988) presented accurate details of the incident on his two-part record “My God Don’t Like It,” later reissued as “The Death of Emmet [sic] Till.” The song graphically recounts how Till’s abductors “shot little Emmett through the head” and dumped his mutilated body in a river with “two hundred pounds tied around his neck.” As Hairston explained in a 1968 interview, “I take to heart whatever happens to people, and then sing about it.” He certainly kept abreast of current events: Hairston’s daughter recalled that her well-informed father “read the newspaper from cover to cover, followed by reading the Holy Bible and lastly he watched the 11:00 p.m. news.”²²²

Hairston was originally from Mississippi, settling in Detroit after serving in WWII. A prominent member of Love Tabernacle Church, he earned his nickname “Hurricane of the Motor City” from having once wrecked some congregation with a particularly forceful performance. Like most gospel singers, Hairston could not pay the bills from music alone, and he supported a large family working at the Chrysler plant until 1970. The vast majority of black gospel was recorded for independent labels, many of which had very limited distribution, so it was not uncommon for artists to sell their own discs at churches and programs. Hairston subscribed to this do-it-yourself ethic by hooking up a sound system to his station

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 132-3.

²²² *Ibid.*, 135-7, 144-5.

wagon, playing his records throughout the neighborhood, and selling them to the crowds that would gather and listen.²²³

Of the twenty-seven gospel songs he recorded between 1955 and 1972, Hairston cut several records documenting significant civil rights moments. In 1956 he covered the Montgomery boycott with his best known song, “The Alabama Bus.” It was released on JVB Records, the black-owned Detroit label that put out C. L. Franklin’s sermon recordings around the same time. With its washboard percussion, piano accompaniment, and vocal delivery, the record sounds very similar to the Delta-bred blues music being performed along Hastings Street, the thriving commercial thoroughfare in the heart of Detroit’s black community. (JVB was located on Hastings, as well as Franklin’s New Bethel Baptist Church until urban renewal claimed the area in the early 1960s.) Lyrically, although catalyst Rosa Parks is replaced by a nameless “man,” Hairston again provides a generally accurate account of events, including reference to the contentious anti-boycott injunction. And according to Rijn, the record was the first blues or gospel song to mention Martin Luther King. Hairston also notes the help and support of African American congressmen Adam Clayton Powell of Harlem and Detroit’s own Charles C. Diggs.²²⁴

In late 1957, Hairston chronicled the events in Little Rock with “Shout School Children,” which Rijn believes was “the only blues or gospel song with a civil rights theme from [Dwight D.] Eisenhower’s second term.” Along with Eisenhower and Arkansas governor Orval Faubus, he references Autherine Lucy, the first African American admitted to the University of Alabama.²²⁵ Hairston recorded “Story of President Kennedy” in 1964, naming Lee Harvey Oswald and Jack Ruby in another one of his detailed accounts. The next year he highlighted “The March On To Montgomery.” His last protest-themed recordings came in 1968, when many more black artists were treading the same paths he had helped forge in the previous decade: “The War in Vietnam” and “Rev. King Had a Time.”²²⁶

²²³ *Ibid.*, 135.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 140-2. “The Alabama Bus” is available on the Time-Life collection of civil rights music, *Let Freedom Sing*.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 143.

²²⁶ Guido van Rijn, *Kennedy’s Blues: African-American Blues and Gospel Songs on JFK* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 129-33.

With the rapid expansion of the movement in the early 1960s, and with its growing presence in the American public consciousness, civil rights gospel records began appearing with greater frequency. At a time when activists were refashioning black church songs into movement music, often gospel singers would show solidarity simply by recording those same freedom songs borrowed from their mutual sacred tradition. The defiant old spiritual “I Shall Not Be Moved” had been adapted by the labor movement since at least the 1930s, but was not among the more favored traditional songs in the black gospel repertoire of the post-WWII era. The Harmonizing Four, one of the top postwar quartets, recorded a version in early 1959, a year before it was reestablished by the sit-ins as an anthem of resistance. (Like another protest standard, “I” had changed to “We” from the original sacred song.) True, during the heyday of the “hard” quartet sound, the Harmonizing Four was somewhat exceptional in its concentration on older traditional material. However, the relatively well-known protest connotations associated with the song made it a conspicuous, if not provocative choice for a major group to record at the time. Its appearance on another black-owned label—Vee Jay Records of Chicago—may have been a significant factor in its commercial release.²²⁷

Aside from cutting the type of documentary songs produced by Hairston, perhaps the clearest way for gospel artists to show movement support was by recording the civil rights anthem “We Shall Overcome.” From its obscure origins in the earlier hymn tradition, through its reshaping by C. A. Tindley, Pete Seeger, and the modern civil rights struggle, “We Shall Overcome” received the highest form of official recognition from President Lyndon B. Johnson. After the “Bloody Sunday” attack on marchers in Selma, Alabama, Johnson dramatically quoted its title in his address to Congress on March 15, 1965, leading to the passing of the Voting Rights Act. Mahalia Jackson’s 1963 Columbia recording of the famous freedom song was only the most prominent example of its many gospel versions.²²⁸

²²⁷ “I Shall Not Be Moved” by the Harmonizing Four is available on *Let Freedom Sing*. Heilbut has noted “one of the most interesting mergers of gospel and politics,” a 1946 New York City concert headlined by Paul Robeson in honor of left-wing congressman, Benjamin Davis. Among others, it featured “neo-jubilee quartet” the Harmonizing Four of Richmond, Virginia. Anthony Heilbut, “The Secularization of Black Gospel Music,” in *Folk Music and Modern Sound*, eds. William Ferris and Mary L. Hart (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1982), 109.

²²⁸ “We Shall Overcome” by Mahalia Jackson is available on *Let Freedom Sing*.

Though most record companies avoided even mild controversy, the postwar proliferation of independent labels expanded the opportunities for black artists to record their music, whatever the message. A lot of these labels were tiny regional imprints, frequently single-man operations with little or no distribution, and some would record virtually any kind of local talent. Gospel singers often paid to make recordings, then sold pressings on their own to shops or program attendees. Like so many groups in the broadly disseminated, deeply grassroots gospel community, the vast majority of such labels have disappeared into historical obscurity—along with the actual records they produced. Copies not destroyed still await discovery by dedicated collectors such as writer and reissue compilation producer Mike McGonigal, who professed it “mind-boggling” to contemplate how many “truly unknown records . . . that there must still be out there.”²²⁹

Going forward into the secular digital age, it seems unlikely that corporations will spend much time or resources in looking for these lost gospel records and having them respectfully repackaged as insightful historical documents of the African American experience. This important if daunting effort will largely remain the preserve of hardcore collectors, independent reissue labels (often European), and long-term projects like the one headed by Robert Darden at Baylor University. Founded in 2005, the Black Gospel Music Restoration Project (BGMRP) has already turned up five versions of “We Shall Overcome” by obscure gospel artists on equally obscure record labels.

The possible exception is on the Gordy label, a subsidiary of Motown, hardly an unknown brand in the 1960s. Owner Berry Gordy was one of many rushing to capitalize on the spectacular success of August 28, 1963. Excerpted from an album titled *The Great March on Washington*, Gordy released a choral rendition of “We Shall Overcome,” featuring Liz Lands and the Voices of Salvation, as the A-side of a 45 record; the B-side contains the climactic minutes of King’s “I Have A Dream” speech.²³⁰

²²⁹ Notes to *This May be My Last Time Singing*, 3.

²³⁰ In addition to “We Shall Overcome” and King’s eighteen-minute address, *The Great March on Washington* album (Gordy 908) features a speech by march leader A. Philip Randolph, as well as speeches by Walter Reuther, Roy Wilkins, and Whitney M. Young, the heads of the United Automobile Workers, the NAACP, and the National Urban League, respectively. The 45 from The Black Gospel Music Restoration Project, issued as G-7023, was accessed at <http://digitalcollections.baylor.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/fa-gospel/id/6943/rec/7>.

The other versions of “We Shall Overcome” found in the BGMRP are more even obscure. In the prefacing “technical notes” to one of his books on political blues and gospel records, Rijn explains that the bookkeeping systems of these small companies were often poorly maintained. “Although record labels sometimes provide useful details, many of the personnel who participated in the recording process are deceased or have never been traced,” he adds. “As a result we are often at a loss for information about precise recording dates, and sometimes even locations.”²³¹ A typical example is “We Shall Overcome” by Philadelphia gospel choir the Savettes, on the Choice label of Newark, New Jersey (“The Sound of America”). The freedom song itself appears as the B-side of “I’ve Worked Too Hard.”²³²

A similar choir version was recorded by the Hudson Chorale, whose “We Shall Overcome” was the B-side of the obvious movement song “I Have A Dream,” written by group leader G. Hudson. This undated record (estimated at 1964 by the BGMRP) was released on Amanda Records (distributed by Atlantic in New York). Even less is known about the other two versions. “We Shall Overcome Someday” by the Templettes Gospel Singers (with Juanita Weston and organist James McGrue) shares the A-side with “If You Want Joy.” The B-side features “Freedom Afterwhile”—which makes no overt movement references—as well as “Precious Lord.” Probably from the same early-to-mid-sixties period (again no listed date), it was released on the obscure label Ebony Productions Records. Perhaps the rarest version of “We Shall Overcome” from the BGMRP is by Alice McClarty and the Traveling Echoes. Labeled as a “preview copy” on the suggestively named Freedom Records, the 45 again lists neither date nor location. The B-side is “Marching On To Freedom,” a basic reworking of the gospel standard “Marching Up To Zion.”²³³

²³¹ Rijn, *Kennedy’s Blues*, xxvi.

²³² “We Shall Overcome,” The Savettes, Choice, SOA #43B. Accessed at The Black Gospel Music Restoration Project, <http://digitalcollections.baylor.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/fa-gospel/id/13048/rec/5>.

²³³ All three versions accessed at The Black Gospel Music Restoration Project: “I Have A Dream”/“We Shall Overcome,” The Hudson Chorale, Amanda Records, 45-401, <http://digitalcollections.baylor.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/fa-gospel/id/11627/rec/2>; “We Shall Overcome Someday”/“If You Want Joy”/“Freedom Afterwhile”/“Precious Lord,” Ebony Productions Records, EB 1080, <http://digitalcollections.baylor.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/fa-gospel/id/11179/rec/1>; “We Shall Overcome”/“Marching On To Freedom,” Freedom Records, ADM-301, <http://digitalcollections.baylor.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/fa-gospel/id/11777/rec/3>.

Rijn has documented a couple more civil rights gospel records from 1963 worth noting. For an unnumbered issue on the Freedom Songs label, the Boston-based Mighty Sons of David recorded “March On Dr. Martin Luther King,” a song Rijn describes as “simply a list of all the places where Dr. King should march for equal rights.” The B-side by the same group is called “We Want Freedom in This Land.” The Sensational Six of Birmingham, Alabama, recorded “Let Freedom Ring” on the Gospel label from Newark. Rijn notes how the group draws the traditional analogy between African Americans and the children of Israel enslaved in Egypt, and employs a “let freedom ring” device to catalogue oppressed places, similar to its use in King’s “I Have A Dream” speech from that same year.²³⁴

By far the most interesting movement-themed record acquired by the BGMRP is an undated 45, issued on the appropriately named Movement label of Charleston, South Carolina, by a male quartet called the Friendly Four. Personnel credits are given to composer and producer by John H. Pembroke, but the group members (except the guitarist and drummer) are not specified. Opposite the gospel-soul ballad “Pray Until the Storm Comes” is the B-side “Where Is Freedom,” quite possibly the best civil rights gospel song recorded during the movement. The Friendly Four performed solidly within the hard quartet style of the golden age fifties, although references to snapping police dogs probably date the recording to no earlier than 1963.

Pembroke, presumably the group leader, introduces “Where Is Freedom” with a spoken message: “Here’s a freedom song for all you freedom fighters out there everywhere. And when you sing, remember the wonderful ones who lost their dedicated lives for this precious purpose, and won’t be around to see it through. Now sing, sing! Every one of you.” Over a hard-driving, hand-clapping rhythm, the lead singer calls out local sites of movement struggle—Atlanta, Mississippi, the group’s presumptive Carolina home region, and so forth—while his partners chant the title’s rhetorical question. The middle verses get more explicit, with mentions of “integration,” “equal rights,” and “the demonstrations” then spreading across the land. In the same gruff church tones that became standard with secular soul shouters of the succeeding era, the lead enthusiastically reports on the contemporary protest fervor: “You may see them marching on

²³⁴ Rijn, *Kennedy’s Blues*, 106, 145.

your avenue, trying to make a better place for me and you!” The song ends with another raucous vamp covering more locations of rising black unrest, from New York and Chicago in the North to Birmingham and Tallahassee in the South.²³⁵

After the November 1963 assassination of John F. Kennedy, a slew of gospel records were made in memory of the slain president.²³⁶ Like FDR in the previous generation, JFK was generally viewed as a sympathetic ally of African Americans—regardless of his actual political commitment to civil rights during most of his career. Thereafter, as the rapidly intensifying “unsettled times” pried open the hidden transcript, all black music forms produced greater amounts of socially conscious “protest” material. Dr. King’s death in April 1968 also represented a watershed for blues and gospel songs about civil rights issues.

According to Rijn’s research, “[King’s] death itself was the subject of at least thirty-four such recordings between 1968 and 1974.”²³⁷ Brother Will Hairston recorded one in 1968. The BGMRP has received no less than three records on the mournful subject. Two are undated 45s: “So So Sad (A Tribute to Dr. King)” by John Griffin and the Gospel All Stars, on Zone Records of Memphis (estimated from 1968 by BGMRP); and “I Believe Martin Luther King Made It Home” by the All-Star Gospel Singers, on Em-Jay Records of Augusta, Georgia. The third is a 45 from 1983, a quarter century after King’s murder, “Sleep On Dr. King, Sleep On” by Elizabeth D. Williams, on Crown Limited Records of Birmingham, city of Dorothy Love Coates, Fred Shuttlesworth, and the ACMHR Choir. Birmingham had been a crucial battleground during the classical Southern movement, and gospel music was a key to the victory.²³⁸

²³⁵ “Where Is Freedom,” The Friendly Four, Movement, 72963. Accessed at The Black Gospel Music Restoration Project, <http://digitalcollections.baylor.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/fa-gospel30/id/12429/rec/4>.

²³⁶ Rijn has devoted an entire monograph to political blues and gospel records from the Kennedy years. Of the 131 songs selected for detailed analysis, 30 percent were recorded by gospel artists; 38 percent of civil rights songs and 48 percent of Kennedy assassination songs were by gospel artists. Rijn, *Kennedy’s Blues*, 172.

²³⁷ Rijn, “Climbing the Mountain Top,” 138.

²³⁸ All three King tributes accessed at The Black Gospel Music Restoration Project: “So So Sad (A Tribute to Dr. King),” John Griffin and the Gospel All Stars, Zone Records, Z-1000, <http://digitalcollections.baylor.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/fa-gospel30/id/12662/rec/1>; “I Believe Martin Luther King Made It Home,” The All-Star Gospel Singers, Em-Jay Records, EJS 107, <http://digitalcollections.baylor.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/fa-gospel30/id/11936/rec/22>; “Sleep On Dr. King, Sleep On,” Elizabeth D. Williams, Crown Limited Records, NR15190, <http://digitalcollections.baylor.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/fa-gospel30/id/11731/rec/20>.

CONCLUSION

Just as we can never know all of the movement's nameless rank-and-file participants, it is hard to identify more than a small handful of gospel singers who notably contributed to the civil rights struggle. Considering the grassroots, non-commercial obscurity of most performers, this should not be surprising. But if almost all black churches featured gospel music, and activist churches were the major centers of movement activity, it is not difficult to imagine the proliferation of activist singers, groups, or choruses. Whether raising funds at gospel music programs, performing at rallies and mass meetings, marching in the streets, or just stuffing envelopes, gospel artists were undoubtedly active throughout local movements. Indeed, Carlton Reese, Cleo Kennedy, and the Birmingham Movement Choir amply proved this under the aegis of Reverend Shuttleworth.

The inherent power of African American church culture gave civil rights leaders and grassroots movement folk potent means to overcome adversity. "Successful social movements usually comprise people who are willing to make great sacrifices in a single-minded pursuit of their goals," notes Aldon D. Morris. "The black church supplied the civil rights movement with a collective enthusiasm generated through a rich culture consisting of songs, testimonies, oratory, and prayers that spoke directly to the needs of an oppressed group." Morris shows how the black church "supplied the civil rights movement with a collective enthusiasm generated through a rich culture consisting of songs, testimonies, oratory, and prayers that spoke directly to the needs of an oppressed group."²³⁹

Black church culture was an important part of the civil rights movement, and gospel music had a significant presence throughout the period. However, the fact that gospel was a *crucial* element of movement history is not a widely broached concept in either popular or scholarly literature. Much of the explanation for this lies in the music's very ubiquity: gospel had revolutionized black church services by the postwar era, and it was a powerful cultural force within black popular consciousness through radio, recordings, and live performances. The tremendous legacy of gospel music, including its pivotal role in all movement phases, has simply been taken for granted without serious thought or argument.

²³⁹ Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 4.

Significantly, the pervasiveness of gospel culture is consonant with the “local people” themes of revisionist civil rights historiography: that is, the search for movement consciousness in black gospel music must move beyond the big names and major labels and look into the disseminated population of grassroots gospel communities. Dr. King could swoop in and out of local movements to reap most of the glory or blame, and outside activists could always leave the violent scenes of grassroots struggle, but local folks were rooted to their homes and ultimately responsible for their own successes and failures. Whereas distant label bosses and marketing strategists had limited familiarity with local conditions, and even less exposure to the personal physical dangers experienced daily by the African American masses, most gospel performers were far removed from the lucrative limelight and acutely vulnerable to the immediate social environment.

Songs reflect the personalities of their composers, and especially the performers who bring them to life. Because of gospel’s strong entrenchment in the black church, the same dialectical tensions at work in the Afro-Christian community were present among the gospel community. Thus the innumerable gospel artists from across the country, at every level of notoriety and professional status, possessed the same wide range of political commitment as the rest of the black community.

Black gospel’s impressive variety was consequently mirrored in the church-based music of the civil rights movement, as professional interpreters, local songleaders, and movement congregations performed the freedom song repertoire in the myriad stylistic variations of the popular gospel idiom. Even in rural churches where spirituals were preserved in more archaic form—and where much of the most crucial grassroots activism took place—essentially all church music was an expression of the local gospel community.

Not only was gospel valuable for organizational purposes, it was invaluable for psychological purposes. At the concrete level, gospel music has proven to be a reliable cultural tool for engendering community social action. At the abstract level, the major lyrical themes of gospel songs emphasize faith and perseverance through life’s struggles, and these messages resonated deeply with the church-steeped masses during that remarkable struggle for freedom.

But the rarity of overt political themes or explicit protest language in gospel lyrics has led many to the mistaken assumption that the music is wholly “otherworldly” in focus, and therefore some of these critics have minimized its influence on the civil rights movement. Yet far from a troubling conundrum, the paradox of an ostensibly apolitical music being a critical factor in the politicization and mobilization of an oppressed people actually holds the key to understanding the gospel/movement connection at the heart of this thesis.

As inheritor of the black sacred song tradition, gospel music has always operated primarily in the realm of infrapolitics—by strategically masking its oppositional expressions in biblical allegory and religious symbolism to deflect the repressive reaction of hostile whites. In other words, to base an analysis of this relationship solely upon open and obvious protest rhetoric is really to miss the entire point. By definition, the hidden transcript just does not work that way. What might appear to be clear evidence of an escapist mentality to outsiders may in fact resonate as a deeply meaningful message of coded resistance within the black gospel community itself.

But according to infrapolitical theory, “unsettled times” of heightened unrest typically create opportunities for the hidden transcript to open up, allowing subaltern groups to produce more overt forms of cultural protest. In conformity with the model, black gospel music did indeed manifest an increased amount of material that more directly addressed the dramatically changing times. That only a miniscule fraction of gospel recordings made during the postwar golden age did so is hardly a sign of the music’s otherworldly rejection of secular struggles. Especially at the height of the civil rights movement, such a striking absence of overt protest in black gospel discourse merely underscores the infrapolitical essence of the form.

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