Gospel (ii)

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A large body of American religious song with texts that reflect aspects of the personal religious experience of Protestant evangelical groups, both white and African-American. Such songs first appeared in religious revivals during the 1850s, but they are more closely associated with the urban revivalism that arose in the last third of the 19th century. Gospel music has gained a place in the hymnals of most American Protestants and, through missionary activity, has spread to churches on every continent. By the middle of the 20th century it had also become a distinct category of popular song, independent of religious association, with its own supporting publishing and recording firms and performers appearing in concerts. Although earlier uses of the terms "gospel hymn" and "gospel song" can be found, their use in referring to this body of song can be traced to P. P. Bliss's *Gospel Songs* (1874) and *Gospel Hymns* and *Sacred Songs* (1875), by Bliss and Ira D. Sankey. Other terms sometimes used are "gospel music" and simply "gospel."

While white gospel music is of little relevance to jazz, the African-American stream has had an enormous impact, and the two genres are intertwined in substantial ways.

1. History.

Late in the 19th century, in a departure from African-American spirituals and plantation melodies and the white hymns on which gospel music was founded, there began to emerge a new type of African-American sacred music – the gospel hymn – in which sophisticated, spiritual-like texts, incorporating simile and colorful imagery, were set to music in the white hymn tradition represented by Lowell Mason and later composers, but "African-Americanized," particularly in their use of syncopation. Gospel hymnody among black congregations increased considerably under the influence of the powerful religious movement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that gave rise to various fundamentalist Pentecostal, "holiness," and "sanctified" churches, especially after the meetings of the Azusa Street Revival in Los Angeles (1906–9). The composer most closely identified with this movement was the Methodist minister Charles Albert Tindley of Philadelphia. His gospel hymns addressed themselves to the needs of poor, oppressed, and often uneducated black Christians.

The basic performance style of African-American gospel music originated in Memphis about 1907, when the founders of the sanctified Pentecostal Church of God in Christ, inspired by the revival they had attended in Los Angeles, instituted their own services, characterized by speaking in tongues (glossolalia), shouting, trances and visions, and suitably emotional music, often improvised, and sung in a highly charged style. Performances by skilled songleaders evoked from the congregation bodily movement (swaying, head-shaking), rhythmic responses (hand-clapping, foot-stamping), and occasional shouted

interpolations in the tradition of 19th-century ring-shouts and circle dances. The songleaders were the ministers and preachers or singers with authoritative voices developed out of the necessity to cut through the vociferous responses of large congregations.

Among the first gospel performers to gain renown, via recordings, were Blind Willie Johnson, known for his blues guitar technique and powerful "church" style of singing, Gary Davis, and Arizona Dranes. The thin but intense soprano of Dranes influenced many later singers, and her piano style was a model for that of the first gospel songs recorded by Thomas A. Dorsey. From the mid-1920s gospel preachers were making popular recordings as well, among them Emmett Dickinson (*Sermon on Tight like that*, 1930).

During the 1930s African-American gospel singers, often appearing in concerts independent of church affiliation but nevertheless called "revivals," tended to use piano rather than guitar as their principal accompanying instrument, and to emphasize in their singing long melismas alternating with short, staccato exclamations. The growth of gospel music during this decade was reflected in the establishment of the Thomas A. Dorsey Gospel Songs Music Publishing Company, the first publishing house dedicated to African-American gospel music; the founding by Dorsey of the National Convention of Gospel Choirs and Choruses (1932); the appearance of Clara Hudmon with a small choir at Radio City Music Hall, New York, and at the Chicago World's Fair in 1939; and the first gospel song to become a best-selling record, Sister Rosetta Tharpe's *Rock Me* (1938), a jazzy version of Dorsey's *Hide me in thy bosom*. Mahalia Jackson, considered by the 1950s to be the queen of gospel singers, first came to public attention in the 1930s.

African-American vocal ensembles have played a major role in the gospel-music tradition – both male quartets (from the 1910s) and other types of solo groups, not exclusively male (from the late 1920s), and choirs (from 1931). There are strong social and religious connections between gospel vocal groups and jazz musicians, but in terms of tangible musical interrelationships this substantial portion of gospel history is of only peripheral importance to jazz. However, some experts consider the piano style of Dranes, especially as manifested in her two unaccompanied solo recordings, *Crucifixion* (1926, OK 8380) and *Sweet Heaven is my Home* (1926, OK 8353), to represent one of the earliest stages in the development of "fast western" or boogie-woogie piano to have been recorded.

In these early decades of intense musical creativity, gospel hymns, composers, preachers, and performers provided, in diverse ways, strong and specific inspiration for developments in jazz and for the emergence of both rhythm-and-blues and soul music. Later this trend was reversed. In the 1970s gospel music moved away from the sanctified church style of call-and-response, choral refrain, and "spirit possession" towards more elaborate harmony, cultivated vocalism, and timbres inspired by African-American popular music. The new style (termed "contemporary" gospel) appealed to a wider audience, although it lost some of its association with the origins of gospel music in the black churches. The further development of gospel in the 1980s had its roots in the recording by Edwin Hawkins of *Oh happy day* in 1969. The number of singing groups, recordings, and venues for performances grew so rapidly that gospel could no longer be classified as traditional or contemporary. In addition to the older style, three newer styles now existed: "Sanctuary contemporary," combining rhythm-and-blues with gospel, was performed in church services and concerts; "urban contemporary," a mixture of jazz, rhythm-and-blues, hip-hop, and gospel, was heard on soul radio stations or seen on gospel television broadcasts; while "devotional gospel" was meditative and less ecstatic than the other types.

2. Instruments and singing techniques.

The first instruments used to accompany gospel music in the early 20th-century African-American churches were percussion, including bass and snare drums, triangles, tambourines, and even washboards played with wire coat-hangers; the tambourine was eventually the most commonly used. The banjo was employed until the 1920s, when it was replaced by the guitar. At the same time the piano also came into use; the style of gospel pianists combined the syncopations of ragtime with left-hand octaves derived from the stride style of jazz piano playing and hymn-like chords in the right hand. It may be noted also that many recordings by preachers with congregational singing, especially in the 1920s, made use of instrumentalists playing in jazz styles apparently simpler than were otherwise recorded; particularly notable examples can be found in the recordings of Rev. D. C. Rice for Vocalion in the years 1928–30. By the 1950s the electronic organ (nearly always a Hammond organ) had been widely adopted instead of the piano. Other instruments to appear occasionally in gospel music are the trombone, trumpet, and saxophone.

Until the 1970s the typical vocal timbre was full-throated, even strained or hoarse; many female singers were shrill in their upper registers. These qualities were partly the result of singing at the extremes of the range and attempting, without amplification, to project over an instrumental accompaniment as well as the singing and shouting of a congregation or audience. Since the 1970s and the rise of contemporary gospel the singing has been characterized by a smoother, purer tone. Most singers begin performances of a song in their middle range, but as the "spirit descends" seek the heightened emotional intensity of the extremes of their compass. All use considerable vibrato and frequently intensify song texts by inserting extra words or phrases; thus "Lord, I'm tired" may become "Lord, you know I'm so tired!" Comparable improvisatory elaborations are also made in melody and rhythm.

Gospel songs are usually performed at a slow or moderate tempo, although the type known as a "shout" is sung very fast. Slow-tempo songs are characterized by the soloist's long melismas, punctuated by a background group or choir; moderate-tempo songs are delivered more percussively, often in call-and-response fashion. A common feature of traditional and contemporary gospel-song performance is the vamp, over which a solo singer improvises textual and musical variations while a background group reiterates a single phrase. The vamp was introduced into gospel music by Mahalia Jackson (e.g. in *Move on up a little higher*, 1947) and Clara Ward and the Ward Singers (*Surely, God is able*, 1949) and is especially notable in Hawkins's *Oh happy day* (1969).

3. Major intersections with jazz.

African-American gospel music has had a tremendous impact upon jazz, whether as a formative musical and spiritual experience in the lives of countless jazz musicians (as indicated in countless biographies within this dictionary); for the diverse aspects of its vocabulary that have been brought into jazz; or for the connection between the ecstatic communal experiences of religious services (as associated with the holiness and santified churches) and jazz performance. Among the most clearly identifiable borrowing is the call-and-response format between preacher and congregation, which in jazz is between an

improvising soloist and ensemble, or between an improvising soloist and the audience. Jazz soloists have utilized the type of highly elaborate melismatic lines derived from characteristic gospel singing. From the 1940s onwards a style of formulaic, improvised instrumental melody based on gospel preaching was taken up by a considerable number of African-American saxophonists (for example, Gene Ammons, Dexter Gordon, and Grover Washington, Jr.). Through them, this style was passed along to David Sanborn, Art Porter, and other players who adopted the tradition from the 1970s onwards. In the mid-1950s the secular adaptation of the Hammond organ followed upon its earlier use in the church. In the late 1950s the hard-bop substyle Soul jazz (jazz) emerged, featuring self-conscious and programmatic evocations of the sound and spirit of the African-American gospel church (most notably in Charles Mingus's *Wednesday Night Prayer Meeting* and *Better git it in your soul*), together with the occasional use of chord progressions specifically borrowed from the gospel repertory. At the same time, following its earlier emergence in gospel music, the vamp came to play a crucial role in the emergence of so-called modal jazz, a style in which (despite its name) modal elements were actually far less significant as a basis for improvisation than the adaptation of lengthy passages of static harmony (i.e., vamps). Decades later, in 1994 James Williams formalized a number of these connections with the founding of his jazz, blues, and gospel group ICU (Intensive Care Unit). Other notable intersections of jazz and gospel include Wynton Marsalis's composition *In this House, On this Morning* (recorded on the album of the same name, 1992–3, Col. C2K53220), and Eric Reed's composition *The Word of God*, which was given its première at Lincoln Center, New York, in November 2000.

The spiritual debt that jazz might owe to gospel is of course unknowable, but it certainly exists. (Grossman and Farrell's book *The Heart of Jazz* (1956) is a serious attempt to analyze the spiritual content of traditional jazz.) At times, from this perspective, jazz and gospel experiences effectively merge, not only in performance environments which lend themselves to communal interaction, but also in the potentially cold atmosphere of the recording studio; one is reminded especially of Marion Brown's succinct description of the ecstatic state achieved in the course of recording John Coltrane's *Ascension* in 1965: "The people in the room were screaming" (from the liner notes to that album, Imp. 95).

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