



## Gospel Music

Horace Clarence Boyer

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# GOSPEL

Horace Clarence Boyer

The year 1950 marked a rite of passage for gospel music. That year Mahalia Jackson's recording of "Move on up a Little Higher" and the Ward Singers' recording of "Surely, God Is Able" both sold a million copies, putting gospel solidly into the mainstream of American music.

Many Americans who first heard these powerful religious songs in the Fifties did not realize, however, the extent to which gospel music was already a well-established genre, quite

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distinct from the spiritual or the blues. Gospel music has its own forms, its own conventions, and its own history.

Gospel songs are rhythmically distinguished by syncopation, a driving beat, and divisions and subdivisions of the beat as well as multiple variations of these divisions. Until the mid-Sixties, the basic harmony consisted of simple major and minor triads with a sprinkling of seventh chords. Since the Sixties, gospel musicians have introduced an abundance of altered chords, a few augmented sixth chords, and occasional modulations.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>For a theoretical analysis of gospel music, see Horace Clarence Boyer, *The Gospel Song: A Historical and Analytical Study*, unpublished master's thesis (Rochester: University of Rochester, 1964).



# MUSIC

Melodically, gospel songs commonly begin in performance as diatonic and conjunct, becoming more disjunct and chromatic "as the spirit leads." Improvisation is the rule rather than the exception, a tradition rooted in the slow, languorous eighteenth- and nineteenth-century "long meter" hymns of Isaac Watts and others. "Amazing Grace" is perhaps the best known of these songs.<sup>2</sup> Improvisation is so much a part of the style that published versions of gospel music contain only the simplest skeleton of what is actually performed, leaving the performer the leverage, indeed the necessity, to impose a personal interpretation

<sup>2</sup>Many of Watts' hymns were published in Richard Allen's 1801 hymnal, the first collection compiled for black congregations.

on the song. Because the oral tradition is still very much alive in gospel music, this emphasis on individuality and improvisation results in highly embellished performances, not unlike those given by singers of the bel canto operas of the early nineteenth century.

Gospel music has to be experienced in person to be fully understood. Since it is part of the participatory tradition of the black churches, a gospel performance is bland without the necessary audience response. Even with a congregation present, the performer's artistry and craftsmanship depend in part upon the amount of support or "talking back"

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*The photographs on pages 39 and 40 are courtesy of James Boyer.*



his or her listeners contribute. Enthusiastic support can elicit rhythmic variation, dramatization of the text, and a great deal of textual interpolations (“Yes, Lord,” “I mean to tell you,” “Let me say that again,” “I wish I had somebody to pray with me,” and so on). The singer will often alter vocal lines on the spot, using quarter tones, melodic bending, scooping, and sliding, all building to an intense feeling of mutual emotional release.

### Origins of gospel music

Gospel music was pioneered for modern audiences in the Twenties by such singers as the Rev. J. M. Gates, Dr. A. W. Nix, and Arizona Dranes.<sup>3</sup> But these singers descended from a long line of preachers and songsters of an earlier era. The seeds of the gospel song go back to the 1800s and the revival movement of the Second Awakening, with its camp meetings where the “participants were the common people, black and white, of all the Protestant denominations; its format, that of a continuous religious service spread out over several days, often an entire week.”<sup>4</sup>

The kind of emotional release these revival services provided, coupled with the African tradition of a participatory service, required a type of music capable of much repetition, lilt, and rhythm. The participants would gather in one of the tents following the main evening services and sing short scraps of affirmations, pledges, and prayers, lengthened out with repetition choruses.

These scraps developed into the camp meeting spiritual, a chorus in irregular meter and rhyme, with paraphrased scriptural references and a refrain that repeated the word “hallelujah.” Such a spiritual might have proceeded in this manner:

Leader: Oh, what ship is this  
We are sailing upon?  
Congregation: Oh, glory, hallelujah.  
Refrain  
All: 'Tis the old ship of Zion.  
Ha - le - loo.  
'Tis the old ship of Zion.  
Ha - le - loo.

Sung in a spirited manner and accompanied by “body rhythm,” mainly foot-stamping and hand-clapping, these spirituals inspired the ring shouts described by William Frances Allen in his 1867 publication, *Slave Songs of the United States*.

<sup>3</sup>For a discussion of this era in gospel music, see the author's article, “An Overview: Gospel Music Comes of Age,” *Black World*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (November 1973), and Tony Heilbut, *The Gospel Sound: Good News and Bad Times* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971).

<sup>4</sup>Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1971), p. 93.

The next step in the evolution of modern gospel music was the jubilee spiritual, popular during the decade before the emancipation proclamation. These songs employed a slightly more sophisticated kind of poetry and a more Westernized sense of harmony. Since these songs were not used for the “shout,” the rhythm was less intricate and slightly more organized:

Leader: Have you got good religion?  
Congregation: Certainly, Lord.  
Leader: Have you got good religion?  
Congregation: Certainly, Lord.  
Leader: Have you got good religion?  
All: Certainly, Lord,  
certainly, certainly.  
Certainly, Lord.

In 1895, when the first black Holiness church was organized, the camp meeting and jubilee spirituals were transformed into the “church song,” a simple refrain without a contrasting section, usually with four lines of poetry, the second and fourth of which were the same or nearly the same. Since the Holiness service was designed to intensify religious fervor, the songs contained few words and limited melodic range but lent themselves to considerable rhythmic variety:

Leader: I'm a soldier—  
Congregation: In the army of the Lord.  
Leader: I'm a soldier—  
Congregation: In the army.  
Leader: I'm a sanctified soldier—  
Congregation: In the army of the Lord.  
Leader: I'm a sanctified soldier—  
Congregation: In the army.  
Succeeding  
lines for  
leader: I'm fighting for my Lord—  
I'll live and I'll die—  
I'm on my way to glory—

With the leader substituting one of the above lines at his discretion in succeeding choruses, the song adopts breadth and variety, and when sung for fifteen or twenty minutes becomes a complex musical experience.

Holiness congregations sprang up rapidly all over the South, and in less than a decade “church songs” were also being sung by black Methodist and Baptist congregations. By the

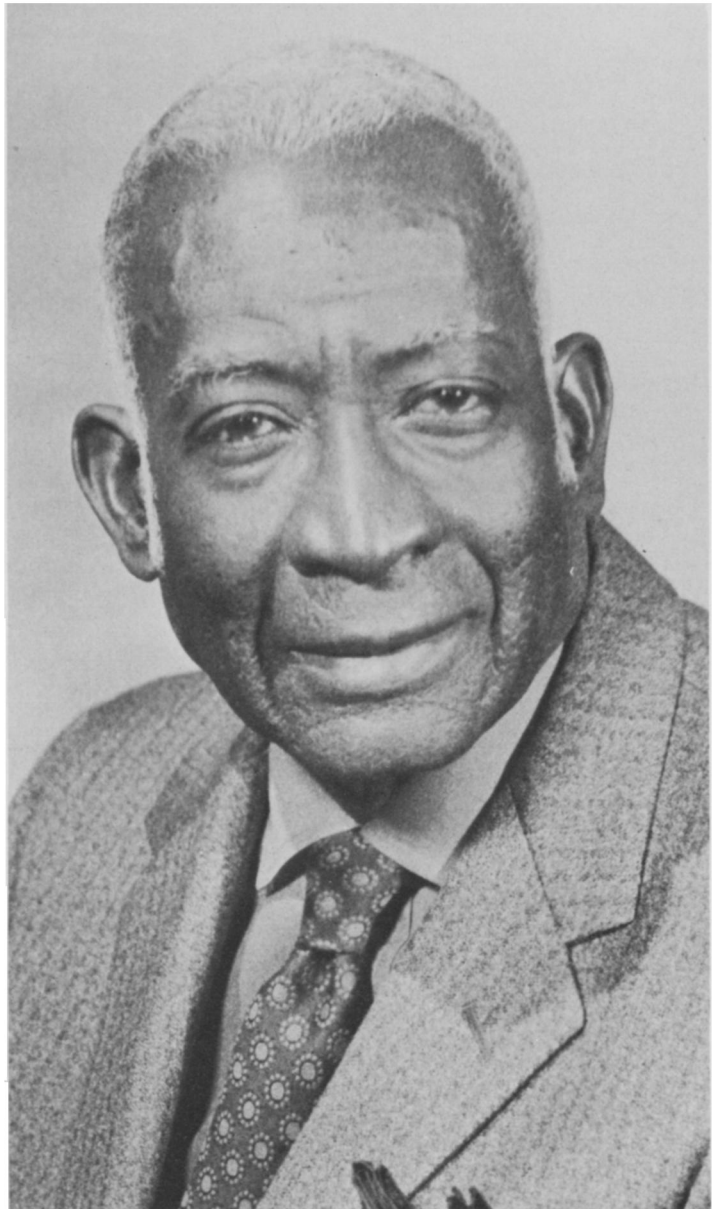
turn of the century, black congregations and their "church songs" had spread to such northern cities as New York, Washington, Philadelphia, Chicago, Cleveland, and Detroit. While "Singing" Johnson was delivering such songs in Jacksonville, Florida, the Rev. Charles Albert Tindley, a Methodist minister newly arrived from the South, was introducing them in Philadelphia.<sup>5</sup> In 1900, Tindley began composing new songs by setting hymnbook-like verses to the tunes and rhythms of "church songs." Three of his songs that are popular with contemporary gospel singers are "When the Storm of Life Is Raging, Stand by Me" (1900), "I'll Overcome Someday" (1901), which was freely borrowed from the emancipation proclamation spiritual "No More Auction Block for Me" and later transformed by the freedom marchers of the Sixties into "We Shall Overcome," and "We'll Understand It Better By and By" (1905). In Memphis, a school teacher and church choir director named Lucie Campbell composed "Something Within Me" in 1905 and continued for the next four decades to produce songs whose lyrics contained uncommonly powerful imagery.

While the gospel song was born in the Holiness church, its members were not the first to receive recognition as gospel singers. Until the Forties, Holiness churches did not allow their members to sing their songs before non-Holiness persons. The members of the early Holiness churches also were generally poorer and less educated than most Baptists and Methodists, and because Holiness worshippers believed in speaking in tongues, there was little interaction between them and members of other black churches.

**The contributions of Thomas A. Dorsey**

In 1866 a group of black Baptists organized the first National Baptist Convention of America and established a music department within the convention by 1900. The annual Baptist conventions were enlivened by miniconcerts of gospel music and solos by leading gospel singers before the Sunday morning sermons of the general president. By the mid-Twenties, the convention had attracted such soloists as Professor Stringfield, Dr. Nix, Dranes, and Sister Sallie Sanders.

When Dr. Nix sang "I Do, Don't You?" at the 1921 convention in Chicago, one of the listeners was blues musician Thomas A. Dorsey, originally from Villa Rica, Georgia. The performance affected Dorsey so strongly that he decided to devote his life to the composition and singing of gospel music. That year he wrote his first gospel song, "If I Don't Get



Thomas A. Dorsey



<sup>5</sup>See the preface to J. W. and J. R. Johnson, *The Book of American Spirituals* (New York: Viking Press, 1925).

There," and published it in *Gospel Pearls*, the first printed collection of gospel music, which is still being reissued.

Dorsey's background in blues was extensive. He had worked in concession stands at theatres that booked stars like Bessie Smith and trumpet player Bunk Johnson, and he had accompanied singers such as Tampa Red and Gertrude "Ma" Rainey. He found it less than easy to exchange this glamorous past for the status of a gospel singer and composer, unwelcome at the more affluent black churches and unnoticed by publishers interested primarily in ragtime and jazz.

But Dorsey persisted, and his work proved so influential that he is commonly recognized as "the Father of Gospel Music."<sup>6</sup> Prior to his contributions, gospel music relied heavily upon existing compositions for most of its texts, harmony, and style. Spirituals were rearranged and the hymns and psalms of Watts, Ira Sankey, Homer Rodeheaver, John Newton, and John Wesley underwent countless transformations. Dorsey set out to capture the specific hopes and frustrations of black Christians with completely original compositions, and succeeded brilliantly. Many of his 500-odd songs remain popular classics, notably "There Will Be Peace in the Valley," written for Mahalia Jackson and recorded by the white country-and-western singer, Red Foley; "Search Me, Lord, I'm Going To Live the Life I Sing About in My Song"; and the most popular gospel song of all time, "Precious Lord, Take My Hand."

Dorsey's influence between 1925 and 1950 was pervasive. He helped train Mahalia Jackson and served as her accompanist from 1937 to 1946. He was the first person to establish a publishing company for the sole purpose of publishing gospel music by black composers. He inspired Gertrude Ward to include gospel songs in the concert repertoire of her daughters, Clara and Willa.

Prior to Dorsey's advent, the unaccompanied male quartet had been the only ensemble for group singing in the black community. Taking their departure from the Fisk Jubilee Quartet and the later all-male jubilee singers, such groups as the Delta Rhythm Boys, the Golden Gate Quartet, and the Selah Jubilee Singers had been favored as the singers for black religious music.

Dorsey often employed a male quartet to travel with him on tours to promote his songs and publishing company. But because all the male quartets in Chicago that he knew were engaged in 1933, he accepted Sallie Martin, newly arrived from Pittfield, Georgia, as his "demonstrator." Later he added two more female singers and created the female gospel group. The treble sound of women singers

added both an angelic quality and an emotional excitement.

With female singers and the added accompaniment of Dorsey's piano, a new gospel sound was created. From this point, two kinds of gospel ensembles coexisted: the male group, unaccompanied, wearing business suits, and supplying additional rhythm and sound by slapping their thighs in time with the music; and the gospel group, composed of women with piano accompaniment, dressed in choir robes and clapping their hands for rhythmic accentuation. The music produced by the male singers was called "quartet singing" and that by the women, "gospel singing." Both kinds of groups survive in contemporary gospel, though many quartets have now added instrumental accompaniment. Many gospel groups now include both men and women.

In 1931, Dorsey and Theodore R. Frye, another gospel music composer and singer, organized the first large gospel choir at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Chicago. Dorsey still directs this choir. In 1932, he employed an Arkansas teenager, Roberta Martin, to serve as pianist for the choir during his absences. A year later, five teenage boys from the choir joined with Martin and Frye to form the Martin and Frye Singers. In 1935, Martin replaced two of the men with women and changed the name of the group to the Roberta Martin Singers.

Martin is credited with being the greatest teacher of gospel singers. For nearly four decades she accepted young singers and pianists as students in her group. Among the famous gospel musicians who started as members of the Roberta Martin Singers are Willie Webb, Delores Barrett, the Gay Sisters (Mildred and Evelyn), Myrtle Scott, Myrtle Jackson, Robert Anderson, Gloria Griffin, Alex Bradford, and the Rev. James Cleveland.

### Modern gospel musicians

By 1940, gospel music had become so popular in the Afro-American community that members from all denominations were flocking to Holiness churches to hear it. The endorsement of this music by the black community prompted singers to begin tours and become full-time professionals. The first such singer was Sister Rosetta Tharpe of Cotton Bluff, Arkansas.<sup>7</sup> Sister Tharpe, who accompanied herself on the steel guitar, was singing before as many as 30,000 people in ball parks and stadiums by 1948. She built a large following through her many recordings and her ability to drive audiences into a frenzy with her "sliding" tones (a moaning technique derived from earlier Dr. Watts hymns, sorrow songs, and chants) and a constant shaking of her head.

<sup>6</sup>In 1973, the publication *Black World* paid tribute to Dorsey for his fifty years of contributions to gospel music. See footnote 3.

<sup>7</sup>"Sister," "Madame," "Evangelist," and "Mother" are common titles for female gospel singers. Males are often known as "Brother," "Reverend," and "Professor."

The next gospel star to emerge was Mahalia Jackson. Settling in Chicago in 1929 after moving from her hometown of New Orleans, Jackson first sang with the a cappella Johnson Singers quartet as a featured soloist. Until quite late in her career, Jackson, who used her deep, dusky contralto to build a slow, dramatic crescendo in gospel ballads, was the least "physical" singer in the field. She favored a pious but joyful approach to singing "the good news," which she carried all over the world.

In 1948, the Angelic Gospel Singers, four young women originally from Asheville, North Carolina, began traveling throughout the United States, singing in churches and school auditoriums. Using only the piano as accompaniment, they started the practice of going into the audience and shaking the hands of the listeners as they sang. Their famous recording of "Touch Me, Lord Jesus" is still unsurpassed.

Another famous group was Clara Ward and the Ward Singers, of Philadelphia. Always traveling in Cadillacs, wearing pastel-colored robes, and sporting wigs long before they became fashionable, the Ward Singers, with Clara at the piano, aimed to evoke the most emotional response possible. Specializing in songs with short sections that could be repeated, they marched, ran, jumped, and stamped through the audience until women wept, screamed, and danced, while men stood on their feet and clapped.



Marie Knight (standing) and Sister Rosetta Thorpe



The Clara Ward Singers (Clara Ward in the center)



**The Soul Stirrers (Sam Cooke on the left)**

The mid-Fifties ushered in concert extravaganzas called “anniversaries.” From four to fifteen singers or groups would appear on one concert, and the atmosphere became almost indescribable. Each singer attempted to outsing and outperform the previous artists. By this time, of course, gospel singing had become a business and admission fees to concerts were standard. Both these concerts and recordings helped gospel music reach a wider and eventually multiracial audience.

Male quartets remained extremely popular during the Fifties, and such groups as the Blind Boys of Alabama, the Blind Boys of Mississippi, the Harmonizing Four, and the Dixie Hummingbirds were much in demand. At the turn of the Sixties, the Soul Stirrers were the reigning group. Setting a romantic melody against a refined gospel background, the Soul Stirrers excelled in such songs as “Wonderful, God Is So Wonderful” and “One More River To Cross,” a work originally sung by Sam Cooke before he left the group for a solo career in secular music.

Several groups made lasting contributions to gospel singing during the Sixties, including Dorothy Love Coates and the Original Gospel Harmonettes, the Swan Silvertone Singers, the Nightingales, Alex Bradford, Brother Joe May, and the Caravans. The Caravans had as their accompanist and director the Rev. James Cleveland, who soon became a star in his own right.

Cleveland left the Caravans and formed his own group, the Cleveland Singers. While four or five singers provided a measure of support for the “sermonette and song” format Cleveland preferred (a style pioneered by Madame



**The Original Gospel Harmonettes (Dorothy Love Coates at the top)**



Edna Gallmon Cooke), thirty to one hundred voices could supply a background like that of a full church congregation. Cleveland found this big sound in the Angelic Choir of Nutley, New Jersey. His recording with the choir of "Peace, Be Still" had enormous impact on the gospel music community. Cleveland completely transformed scriptural passages to relate to such contemporary problems as shortage of rent money, gossip in the neighborhood, and the desire for new homes, cars, and clothes. He thus reached a public dubious about the rewards of Christianity and amassed a following unlike that of any previous gospel singer.

The late Sixties produced "Oh Happy Day" by the Edwin Hawkins Singers and broader, multiracial support of gospel music. "Oh Hap-

py Day" was frequently played on "top 40" radio stations and was even found to be danceable. The Seventies have brought such new gospel singers as Andrae Crouch, Walter Hawkins, Henry Jackson, Beverly Glenn, and the Violinaires.

Because gospel music is now supported not only by church-going Christians but by all lovers of music, the style presented by commercial groups has changed tremendously. Almost gone from concert halls and recordings are the simple harmonies, single piano accompaniment, business suits, and choir robes. In their places have emerged intricate harmonies, rhythm sections replete with synthesizers, casual dress, Carnegie Hall engagements, and fees as high as those paid to film stars.



Photo Copyright Afro-American Newspapers

Mahalia Jackson

### Forms and structures of gospel music

Gospel music can be divided into three main groups by tempo: fast, slow, and "ad lib," the latter category variously called "without rhythm," "chanting," "recitative," and "sermonette," though a sermonette may be superimposed on any tempo. Fast songs are those in  $\frac{2}{4}$  or  $\frac{4}{4}$  time with a quarter-note metronome marking of 74 to 200. Slow songs, always in  $\frac{12}{8}$ , have a marking of 44 to 60 for the dotted quarter note. Slow songs in  $\frac{2}{4}$  or  $\frac{4}{4}$  are not a part of the style. The "ad lib" type songs have a quarter-note marking of 50 to 60 for purposes of analysis, though these songs are often completely unmetered.

Tempo division is the most practical way to approach categorization, since such a song as "Amazing Grace" can be delivered in either of the three tempos. It is applicable to all the many performing categories—solo, duet, trio, quartet, choir, or congregation. These performing groups are all primarily vocal; the solo instrumental ensemble playing gospel music is still uncommon. As accompanists, however, the instrumentalists are developing new importance. With the piano and its riffs and breaks, the organ's wail, and percussive rhythms, the interplay of voice and instruments is becoming increasingly complex.

The textures of gospel music are rich and varied. The most popular texture is that of "call and response," one voice against many. The alternation of the leader and congregation in "Have You Got Good Religion?" is a good illustration. An African retention, this style of singing is called "responsorial" in traditional Western European theory. Another common texture is homophony, in which one voice leads melodically, while the other voices provide a chordal accompaniment, as in the Angelic Gospel Singers' recording of "Touch Me, Lord Jesus."

Two other kinds of texture are becoming popular: antiphony and polyphony. Antiphony, the alternation of chorus against chorus, can be heard in the Rev. James Cleveland's recording of "Caught Up To Meet Him." The polyphonic approach of singing several melodies simultaneously can be heard in Roberta Martin's recording of "Certainly, Lord." Monody, the rise of a solo voice against keyboard accompaniment, is, of course, a mainstay of gospel music, made famous by such singers as Mahalia Jackson, Brother Joe May, and Inez Andrews.

Gospel music is not without its standard music structures. It is true that it has retained the African characteristic of developing a short melodic motive through repetition, but most of the song forms of Western European tradition are also reflected in the style.

The verse-and-chorus gospel form, combining a refrain and a contrasting section, re-

sembles traditional AB or two-part form. The chorus may be repeated, but the two parts can easily be discerned. Such songs as Cleveland's "Grace Is Sufficient," recorded by the Roberta Martin Singers, and Dorothy Love Coates' recording of her "You Must Be Born Again" are prime examples.

Similarly, the chorus-verse-special chorus gospel song is a modification of ternary form, in which the refrain introduces the song, followed by a contrasting section and a return to the refrain, this time with alterations that lead to an improvised section, generally of repetitions ("vamping"), called an extended chorus. Good examples are the Cleveland recording of "Peace, Be Still" and Edwin Hawkins' "Oh Happy Day."

The five-part song or rondo has a returning melody, alternating with several contrasting sections. Careful attention to Cleveland's recording of "The Lord God Almighty Done Brought Us Out" will point up differences in each of the verses of the song.

The through-composed song, in which each stanza is set to a completely new melody, is rare in gospel music, though an example exists in an old recording by Madame Marie Knight of "My Expectations."

When the gospel song made a complete break with the old style "church song," the slightly more refined strophic song was adopted and remains a popular form. Strophic gospel songs, in which each stanza is sung to the same melody, include Dorsey's "Precious Lord, Take My Hand," and Lucie Campbell's "He'll Understand and Say, 'Well Done.'"

A careful analysis of the gospel song literature also reveals occasional theme and variations forms and gospel blues forms, the latter being sixteen-bar compositions with a poetic scheme of AAB.

The melodies of gospel songs are based primarily on three scales. In order of frequency they are the major pentatonic, the seven-tone mixolydian mode, and the minor pentatonic. The major pentatonic, a scale of five tones with no semitones, is most often encountered in gospel music with the following degrees:

1	2	3	5	6
		or		
C	D	E	G	A

Another pentatonic scale found in gospel music is based on the first five degrees of a diatonic scale. This is the scale on which the old "church song" "When the Saints Go Marching In" is based:

1	2	3	4	5
		or		
C	D	E	F	G

While the major scale appears next in frequency, the seventh scale degree is often flattened, similar to the mixolydian mode. The diatonic scale then becomes:

1 2 3 4 5 6 ♭7  
 or  
 C D E F G A B♭

The minor pentatonic scale found in gospel songs employs the following tones:

1 3 4 5 7  
 or  
 A C D E G

In a very slow gospel song such as "ad lib" or "chanting," a highly melismatic style results from use of the chromatic scale.

### The influence of gospel music

Gospel music is no longer only a genre but a whole style of singing freely adapted by performers of other music. Many pop and soul singers are former gospel singers who, though they sing secular texts, still employ the gospel style. Such singers include Gladys Knight, Lou Rawls, Nina Simone, Dionne Warwick, Aretha Franklin, Billy Preston, and the Staple Singers.

Perhaps gospel music is so accessible because it is a synthesis of many American vocal styles. In turn, gospel traditions and forms—its rhythms, instrumental and vocal textures, performance mannerisms, and its emotional intensity—continue to infiltrate and influence other popular singing styles.

Whether because gospel music provides a necessary respite from the "plastic" music of other, more obviously sophisticated genres, or simply because it is a music that is close to nature, it continues to grow and win new audiences to its style and its message.

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