

Oklahoma's Black Sacred Music Traditions

by Dr. Willie Smyth

Black religious music styles are uniquely American art forms, fusions of the music and culture of Europe and Africa. The history of Black sacred music parallels the history of our young nation. It is a product of the meeting of two cultures--European and African--which were transported to our country separately, but would share a common destiny.

As Black people struggled to survive, they expressed their hope, their faith, their sorrow, and their joy through music. The rich sound and vibrant rhythms of this music have influenced the directions of popular music throughout the world. Black sacred music has a number of different styles: metered, "Old 100," shouting, jubilee, spirituals, gospel, sacred harp, shaped note (4 and 7 note), a capella quartet, accompanied quartet, soloist, and choirs. To many people, these have come to be generically known as gospel.

By whatever names, Black religious music is more than music; it is spirituality in art. It laughs, it cries, it nourishes and it consoles. Gospel sings of the anguish of enslavement and the dream of freedom. As with jazz and blues, gospel music is rooted in the age of slavery, when the chants and tribal rhythms of a distant homeland soothed the pain of bondage.

In America, Black slaves were able to incorporate many native religious beliefs and practices into the framework of Christianity, bringing a new vitality of religious expression, especially in the areas of singing and preaching. Slavery produced the spirituals, one of the greatest sacred forms of America. As a body of song, spirituals became a national treasure, influencing songwriters and composers as well as the general public.

Perhaps the most widely-known spiritual of all times, "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," was composed in the mid-1800s by "Uncle Wallace" Willis, a servant at Spencer Academy, a Choctaw boarding school for boys in Choctaw County. Willis and his wife, Minerva, often sang Willis's songs for the students, teachers, and guests of Spencer Academy. A missionary took Willis's song to the East where it was quickly picked up by university choirs.

An important development in the history of Black sacred music was taking place at this time. The traditional spirituals were usually performed "a capella" or without musical accompaniment, except for hand clapping or foot tapping to keep time and to allow the body to move. After emancipation, church choirs, trios, and quartets began to render the old-time songs in three and four part harmony. During the Reconstruction years a group of students from Fisk University, a Black college in Nashville, Tennessee, began singing arrangements of spirituals under the leadership of Director George L. White. Their successful tours of the Northeast from 1871 to 1875 provided funds for the

continued operation of Fisk University and began the spread of the popularity of this kind of music throughout the United States and Europe.

This unaccompanied style of singing sacred songs in close harmonies, as popularized by the Fisk Jubilee Singers, quickly spread throughout Black communities. By the early-to-mid-twentieth century many Black religious singing groups that were influenced by this style were receiving national exposure through tours, radio shows, movies, and records. Groups such as the Golden Gate Quartet, Southernaires, Wings Over Jordan, and Fairfield Four had very popular national radio broadcasts and commercial records sales. In Oklahoma many churches nurtured outstanding "a capella" quartets, large groups, and male and female soloists, who provided rich contributions to Black sacred music traditions.

After World War II the singing of hymns and spiritual songs began to reflect trends in contemporary popular music. In the 1940s and 1950s quartets and choirs employed instrumentation including piano, organ, drums and electric lead and bass guitars to provide rhythmic and musical accompaniment to the voices. This development, which often necessitated the use of microphones, increased the power and volume of the vocalists. At the same time, it lessened the demands on the singers, who no longer depended on voice alone to carry the beat and lay down the bass line. This modern style came to be known as "gospel" and is the most popular singing style in Black churches today.

Oklahoma has produced a vast array of brilliant performers of Black sacred music. In urban and rural churches throughout the state one can hear the joyful sounds of Black musical salutation and celebration. Oklahoma City's Jessie Mae Renfro Sapp is a soloist who ranks with great artists such as Mahalia Jackson, James Cleveland, and Shirley Caesar. Reverend Matthew McClarty from Ada was one of the most popular performers who represented Oklahoma in the 1982 Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington, D.C. The New Harmony Singing Convention from Wewoka sings the same 4-note "shape note" hymns that the members' ancestors brought to Oklahoma from Mississippi in the early 1900s. The Church Rockers from Tulsa keep alive the tradition of "a capella" quartet singing. The Truthettes from Oklahoma City have received national recognition as being among the country's best female gospel groups. Dennis Williams of Oklahoma City represents the many artists who have brought gospel traditions to Oklahoma from other states. In North Carolina, where he lived before moving here, Dennis was lead singer for the Mighty Wonders, and was part of the nationally-acclaimed North Carolina Black Heritage tour.

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