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| |  | | --- | | **Origins and History:**  *"Gospel is first and foremost a direct descendent of spirituals. What Thomas Dorsey and his friends kept as the defining attributes of gospel music - the call-and-response format, ample room for improvisation, rhythm, frequent use of the flatted seventh and third in melodies - remain true even today. The elements introduced by later musical forms, such as close harmonies (barbershop quartets), a sense of professionalism (jubilee quartets), showmanship (minstrelsy), the regular use of an aab rhyming scheme, and a pronounce beat (the blues) all endure, but are tacked on the spine of the original spirituals, which are for the most part irrevocably linked to their African forebears"*.  - People Get Ready! A New History of Black Gospel Music, Robert Darden, Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004 | | Four questions frequently asked about gospel music are "What is it?", "When did it start?", "How did it evolve?" and "What are the different gospel styles?".  Here is a compilation which attempts to answer these questions looking back at the history of church music, African roots, African American slavery, gospel music's evolution, seminal figures of the gospel music genre, and finally a synopsis of gospel music styles up to the present day.  **What is Gospel Music?**  Some people would say gospel music is any religious song, however scholars would interpret the term as referring to music that is written and performed to express either a personal or a communal belief regarding Christian life, as well as (in terms of the varying music styles) to give a Christian alternative to mainstream secular music. Like other forms of Christian music, the creation, performance, significance, and even the definition of Gospel music varies according to culture and social context. Gospel music is composed and performed for many purposes, including aesthetic pleasure, religious or ceremonial purposes, and as an entertainment product for the marketplace. However, the most common themes of most Gospel music is praise, worship or thanks to God, Christ, or the Holy Spirit.  Gospel song lyrics are often subjective, usually addressed to one's fellow human beings, and focus on a single theme that is emphasised through repetition of individual phrases and concludes by a refrain after each stanza. Text deals with conversation, atonement through Christ, salvation, and heaven's pleasures. Stylistically, they range from meditative and devotional to instructive and even militant. Gospel songs rarely employ the technique of utilising a single tune between texts, as often happens in other forms of music. Generally, gospel music is confined to Protestant evangelical groups, both black (African-American) and white (European American), but it can also be found in Roman Catholic churches.  **Origins of Gospel Music**   |  |  | | --- | --- | | One can pursue the origins of gospel music through the academic discipline of ethno-musicology (going back to Europe and Africa), through a study of the 2,000-year history of church music, and through a study of rural folk music traditions, but for practical purposes, gospel music as we know it began in the late 19th century. Its two roots were the mass revival movement (starting with Dwight L. Moody and Ira D. Sankey) and the Holiness-Pentecostal movement. Prior to the meeting of Moody and Sankey in 1871, there was an American rural/frontier history of revival and camp meeting songs (folk hymns / spirituals), but the gospel hymn was of a different character, and it served the needs of mass revivals in the large cities.  The revival movement employed popular singers and song leaders (starting with Ira Sankey) who used songs by writers such as George F. Root, Philip P. Bliss, Charles H. Gabriel, W. H. Doane, and Fanny Crosby. The first published use of the term gospel to describe this kind of music was in 1874 when Philip P. Bliss edited a revival song-book titled "Gospel Songs" for use in evangelical campaigns. In 1875, in conjunction with Ira David Sankey, he compiled "Gospel Hymns and Sacred Songs" and in 1876 he compiled the book known as "Gospel Hymns No. 2". Bliss' and Sankey's collection can still be found in many libraries today.   The popularity of revival singers and the openness of rural churches to this type of music (in spite of its initial use in city revivals) led to the late 19th and early 20th century establishment of gospel music publishing houses such as those of Homer Rodeheaver, E. O. Excell, Charlie Tillman, and Charles Tindley. These publishers were in the market for large quantities of new music, providing an outlet for the creative work of many songwriters and composers | http://www.earlygospel.com/eg-chr10.jpg Dwight Lyman Moody  http://www.earlygospel.com/eg-chr8.gif Ira David Sankey |   The Holiness-Pentecostal movement, or sanctified movement, appealed to people who were not attuned to sophisticated church music, and holiness worship has used any type of instrumentation that congregation members might bring in, from tambourines to electric guitars. Pentecostal churches readily adopted and contributed to the gospel music publications of the early 20th century.  **African Roots**  Tribal African music of four hundred years ago differed from European and white American music in one major regard: secular music did not exist in African traditions. Besides sacred music, Europeans sang about love, war, and drinking, as well as the recent historical events of nearby villages, or far off countries. While many of these songs mentioned God in some manner, many still remained secular and popular among the village and country folk. All African music was naturally sacred and the concept of singing secular music was alien to them. Their music can be seen to satisfy four main functions in the fabric daily life, they are: religious, agricultural and sexual fertility, hunting, and war. In this regard African music has more in common with Native American music than European music since song was used as a means of being in harmony with nature and the cosmos. One predominant style of music that is still retained and was brought to America during the slavery period of the early 1600s to 1865, is the call and response pattern in which a leader sings a line and the entire group answers. Typical styles also included drums and other percussion instruments played a complex rhythmic accompaniment.  **Slavery Era**  From the need to subjugate or from fear, many American slave owners did not allow blacks to use traditional African instruments, nor could they play or sing their native music. Gradually much of the words and melodies were forgotten and disappeared in North America. It is because of this ban on their musical ancestry that a new African American style of music was created. New songs were created using the African traditions of harmony, call and response, behind a strong rhythmic meter mixed with European traditions of harmony and musical instruments.   |  |  | | --- | --- | | Gospel songs created by Blacks used Christian subjects with African vocal and rhythmic influences. The church became a sanctuary for Black slave expression. It was the only place that groups of slaves could congregate without fear of white supervision. Though not all slave holders allowed religious instruction or permission to worship and had to meet secretly.    The enslavement of Blacks in the American Colonies began during the 1600's. Slavery | http://www.earlygospel.com/eg-ori5.gif Slaves outside wooden church | | flourished in the South, where large plantations grew cotton, tobacco, and other crops. The plantations required many labourers. Work songs and "field hollers" were used to ease the drudgery of hard labour in the fields, later they were sung while laying railroad track, or while working in places such as the many turpentine camps in the mid 1800s. | |   Slavery was less profitable in the North, where economic activity centered on small farms and industries. By 1860, the slave states had about 4 million slaves. The slaves made up nearly a third of the South's population. Since demographically, more blacks lived in the South, the birth of gospel music became endemic first in the South before it was finally spread to the rest of white America. First, through travelling minstrel shows in the late 1800s, then through vaudeville and sheet music in the early 1900s, and finally through records in the early 1920s. Many of the songs and melodies were embraced by whites and began to greatly influence white religious and popular American music. By the early 1800s it was common for slaves to perform for their masters, and later in front of polite white society in larger musical ensembles, but it wasn't until the end of the Civil War that European musical instruments were abundantly available to former slaves. Instruments were literally left on battlefields that were befriended by new black owners. Instruments were cheap and freed blacks used what little new income they had to purchase or barter for them. Although some blues forms existed in the early 1800s, as the end of the 1800s drew near the first black secular music, the "blues" began to evolve almost instantly and simultaneously all over the states and territories, where ever large groups of blacks lived. Technically the field holler was the first musical style to move away from religious themes and concerned itself with work only (and much can be said about the double meanings of many gospel songs, such as Swing Low, Sweet Chariot which on the surface is about life in the hereafter, but any slave knew it was about the promise of life in the here and now devoid of slavery. "home" wasn't necessarily heaven, but of freedom instead). However, blues was the first solely secular form of African American based music with the birth of ragtime and jazz following closely behind.  **The Church and Preachers**  The role of the church remained central to Blacks in America once they were emancipated.  With emancipation, a just and equal freedom was elusive and largely nonexistent.  Jim Crow laws remained as a given in the South and a huge exodus of Blacks migrated to the industrialized North, which promised jobs and more freedom. To a very limited degree jobs were found, but only jobs that whites did not want to do.  More freedom was granted to them only, as some historians argue, because the North lacked the tradition of a fully organized and functioning racist tradition, and because virtually the entire organized abolitionist tradition existed in the North. The former abolitionists switched from advocating emancipation to advocating fair treatment for recently freed Blacks.  With this political and social backdrop, the church evolved as a religious sanctuary from the eyes of slave holders to a sanctuary where Black culture and music could thrive. In this atmosphere churches were used as meeting places for black town forums with, at times, more of political than religious agendas.  Gospel music was changing rapidly. As once rural Blacks migrated to large cities in the North and South, and with the advent of a growing black economy an emerging urban sophistication, gospel music moved on from some of the cruder forms of harmony, melody. and structure. Whites portraying Blacks nationwide in minstrel shows whetted the appetite for white audiences who desired to hear the real thing. Beginning in 1871 the black Fisk Jubilee Singers, who were students of the all black Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, travelled widely in America and internationally with great success singing spirituals. Also, the late 1800s Ragtime was developing into what a 1917 San Francisco newspaper music critic called "jazz".  Gospel music had influenced blues and jazz, and now, by the early 1900s, blues and jazz were in turn, influencing gospel music. for instance, the syncopated rhythms of ragtime firmly entered many of church performers approach to existing and newer songs. Many travelling singing preachers began to accompany themselves with piano and guitar. The guitar became a popular form of accompaniment due to ease of mobility. Since blues pianists and guitarists were common nationwide, the singing preachers began to adopt the chordal and melodic styles of many of bluesmen and women. Blues and jazz was the popular rage, and served as the spice for black musical palates, while gospel was the religious staple. The more theatrical and prosperous travelling preachers and performers sang in revival tents and as guests in churches and missions for the homeless. Many of them travelled with an entourage of musicians and small choirs.  White music publishers recognized that the antebellum style of black jubilee and spirituals were rapidly fading and began to widely publish a huge amount of nineteenth century sheet music. This brought a potentially dying form of gospel music into the white parlours and churches which were loved either for the beauty of the music or nostalgia of the good old days of antebellum South.  After the Civil War, it had become the norm for black churches to factionalize into various denominations according to the region and predominant white denominational influence. The more conservative black Methodist and Separatist Baptist churches from their inception preferred the sedate hymns of English composer Isaac Watts (1674-1748). Blacks embraced Methodism early on since white Methodists readily adopted some of the black camp meeting songs, and repetitive choruses. In addition these white Methodists mimicked the black style of disjointed affirmations, prayers, and pledges. Still, both black and white Methodists and black Separatist Baptists services were musically tame in comparison to the emerging black Holiness and Four Square churches. These churches retained the unrestrained "country" element found in lesser sophisticated congregations, and related more directly in musical form, intensity, and attitude found in various blues forms of the day and later in rhythm and blues, rockabilly, and rock and roll.  **The Seminal Influence of Thomas A. Dorsey**  Thomas Andrew "Georgia Tom" DorseyThomas Andrew "Georgia Tom" Dorsey first gained recognition as a blues pianist in the 1920s and later became known as the "father of gospel music" for his role in developing, publishing, and promoting the gospel blues.  **T**homas A. Dorsey learned his religion from his itinerant black Baptist preacher father and piano from his organ music teacher mother in Villa Rica, Georgia, where he was born in 1899. He also came under the influence of local blues pianists when they moved to Atlanta in 1910. He and his family relocated to Chicago during World War I where they joined the Pilgrim Baptist Church, and he studied at the Chicago College of Composition and Arranging and became an agent for Paramount Records. He began his musical career known as Georgia Tom (initially "Barrelhouse Tom"), playing barrelhouse piano in one of Al Capone’s Chicago speakeasies and leading Ma Rainey’s Jazz band. He hooked up with slide guitarist Hudson "Tampa Red" Whittaker with whom he recorded the best selling slightly racy blues hit, "Tight Like That," in 1928 and wrote more than 460 Rhythm and Blues and Jazz songs.  Discouraged by his own efforts to publish and sell his songs through the old method of peddled song sheets and dissatisfied with the treatment given composers of race music by the music publishing industry, Dorsey became the first independent publisher of black Gospel music with the establishment of the Dorsey House of Music in Chicago in 1932. Although he published his own music and others, he had the acumen to include singer Sallie Martin as a partner. He wrote the songs and secured the rights to other songs. Sallie Martin then travelled from coast to coast performing and selling music sheets to black churches. It is Dorsey's distinctive style of writing that the majority of choirs use today. A combination of the old hymnody of Watts, and of the African "call and response" sung in country churches.  In 1932 Chicago's second largest church, Pilgrim Baptist, employed Dorsey to organize and direct its own gospel chorus. Dorsey organized a performance for the three gospel blues choruses with which he was involved, and this collaboration became the impetus for the founding of the National Convention of Gospel Choirs and Choruses. Dorsey was elected as the founding national president, a position he held until his nominal retirement in 1983. This period of church involvement marked a turning point in Dorsey's career as he moved away from performing solos and duets toward directing large groups.  Also in 1932 Dorsey's wife, Nettie Harper, died during childbirth, and their son died the following day. This great personal tragedy inspired him to write his most famous piece "Take My Hand, Precious Lord," the first of his religious songs to mirror lyrically the emotional and personal impact of his blues compositions. Almost equally well known is his "Peace in the Valley," which he wrote for Mahalia Jackson in 1937. Dorsey worked extensively with Mahalia Jackson, establishing Jackson as the preeminent gospel singer and Dorsey as the dominant gospel composer of the time. His work with Jackson and other female singers, including Della Reese and Clara Ward, ensured Dorsey's continued prominence. He would eventually compose over 3,000 songs and in 1979, he was the first black elected to the Nashville Songwriters International Hall of Fame.  From the time Dorsey became involved in Chicago's African-American, old-line Protestant churches, his background in the blues greatly influenced his composing and singing. At first these "respectable" Chicago churches rejected this new form, partially because of the unseemly reputation blues performance had, but more because of the excitement that gospel blues produced in the church congregation. A controversy developed between two conflicting visions of the role of the church in African-American society. One segment envisioned an institution that nurtured a distinct African-American religion and culture; the other saw the church as a means by which African Americans would assimilate first into mainline American Christianity with its sharply contrasting worship demeanor and second into the dominant Anglo-American culture. However, by the end of the 1930s, the former group had prevailed, because of the overwhelming response of the congregation to gospel blues. From that time on, it became a major force in African-American churches and religion.  **Gospel Music Evolution**  African Roots  Africa, where it all began. Of all the lavish gifts Africa has given the world, the richest is the unique combination of music and religion: religion with rhythm. With the first African slaves landing on American shores around 1619 came African rhythm, work songs and field hollers - the basic elements for the spirituals. It is rhythm that drives American music: the spirituals, and by extension gospel, the blues, jazz, ragtime and rock n'roll.  The Rise of Spirituals  From the early 1600's right through to the American Civil War in 1865 groups of African American slaves in the Southern states sought solice in work songs and field hollers to ease the drudgery of hard labour in the fields, on the railroads, in the turpentine camps, wherever slaves were put to work as forced labour. The 'call and response' religion-based songs that gave them hope for a brighter future. Two distinct approaches to slavery had quickly emerged in America; the Northern states had slaves working alongside their 'tradesmen' masters (such as carpenters, blacksmiths, printers, tailors), whereas in the Southern states the slaves worked en masse with brutal overseers in much harsher conditions. So it would appear from all available research that spirituals, in the modern sense of the word, evolved from these work songs and field hollers in the Southern states, probably in the late 1600s to mid 1700s.  During this period slaves clung to their own religion and music separately to their white masters. Slaves were considered too primitive to comprehend Christianity consequently little effort was spent on 'saving' slaves. However, as slaves became freemen, they were slowly admitted to slave owners' houses of worship. It took a long time for the 'Christianizing' of slaves to be accepted, as once they could speak the same language, dressed the same way and were 'saved' by the same god it was manifestly harder to treat slaves as 'sub-human'. Gradually African Americans did become Christians, but how they worshiped varied widely and rarely in full and equal communion with their white counterparts. This state of affairs continued until the Great Awakening began in the mid-1700s, a religious revival fueled by an army of itinerant preachers; many African Americans found salvation at these early crusades.  However it was not until late 1700s / early 1800s that independent African American churches of various denominations began in North America. During this period these new churches initially used the same psalms or hymnbooks as the white churches but it wasn't long before pioneering black preachers introduced their own hymnals. In 1801 Rev. Richard Allen published the hymnal '*Collection of Spiritual Songs and Hymns'.*The hymnal contained a selection of hymns that had a special appeal, being long-time favourites of African Americans. It was also the first known printing of 'wandering refrains' - chorus-like refrains added to various hymns, structured in such a way that singers who felt so moved could shout or moan phrases such as "Yes, Lord" in the 'empty' spaces in the music and singing  - an embellishment that is also found in the musical traditions of West Africa. Spirituals had 'come of age'.  The American Civil War   |  |  | | --- | --- | | Spirituals were used in the American Civil War in two special ways worthy of mention. Firstly two of the best known civil war heroes besides the great politicians and generals, Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman, used them in their struggle for slave freedom. Sojourner Truth travelled widely preaching and singing about the abolition of slavery, also using spirituals whilst helping recruit black troops for the Union Army. Harriet Tubman, cook, nurse, spy, army scout, guerilla fighter, and most significantly, conductor/guide in the Underground Railroad used spirituals as signal songs in her many journeys freeing slaves. These songs contained coded messages warning travellers of danger or to signal a clear path. Two of her 'signature' songs "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" and "Go Down, Moses" are prime examples. The latter also had the distinction of being the first spiritual published with music in the United States. Harriet Tubman was also a friend of Col. Thomas W. Higginson, who, along with a small group of like-minded people gathered together during the early days of the civil war and wrote articles and generally spread the word about the spirituals of the South, hitherto largely unknown in the North. This was one of the  most significant milestones in African American music as it did much to spur national interest in the music of slaves. Preservation of the spirituals became a religious quest for Higginson, who as commander of the First South Carolina Colored Volunteers, documented dozens of spirituals sung by the black troops, how they were sung, when they were sung, and the symbolic nature of the songs. Civilians Miller McKim and Lucy McKim Garrison also documented many spirituals on the Georgia Sea Islands, and together with the collections of Lucy's cousin Charles P. Ware and scholar and musician William Francis Allen, the assembled collections eventually became the book "*Slave Songs of The United States*", another milestone in African American music and folk history, even Allen's introduction to the book proclaimed that all the spirituals were priceless in tracing the life and development of the African American slave.  President Abraham Lincoln was known to sing spirituals regularly during many visits to a 'contraband camp' in Washington DC [a 'contraband camp' was a refuge for | http://www.earlygospel.com/eg-ori6.jpg Harriet Tubman  http://www.earlygospel.com/eg-ori7.gif Sojourner Truth | | escaped slaves who the Union forces refused to return to their former Confederate masters - i.e. 'contrabands of war']. But it was the black troops who used spirituals most poignantly,  particularly when marching into towns such as Charleston, SC and Richmond, VA after the fleeing of the Confederates and subsequently when freeing the imprisoned slaves. | |   Reconstruction  During the Reconstruction era of 1867-77 African Americans resisted, to an extraordinary degree, the very human tendency to exact a well-deserved revenge on their former masters and ex-rebel (Confederate) soldiers. Popular at the time was an exhilarating spiritual referred to as their "Marsellaise" [probably titled "New Jerusalem"]that was triumphant rather than vengeful. To most African Americans, the spirituals, first sung in the secret meetings and brush arbor churches [a temporary rough log structure covered with bushes], very clearly explained that their faith had been the catalyst that wrought the miracle of emancipation even more than "Marse" Lincoln's armies.  Interestingly as the years past after the Civil War the spirituals sung by older blacks were notably 'tamer' as some of the freed slaves found themselves uncomfortable singing the old songs; they found them demeaning and an unwelcome reminder of a dark past, so much connected in their minds with slavery. Still, the spirituals endured but their survival was by no means assured in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Two radically different cultural forces emerged that threatened their continuation as a unique readily identifiable African American folk music: the rise of the Fisk University Jubilee Singers phenomenon and the ongoing co-opting of African American culture by the  minstrel movement.  Jubilee Singers  The story of the Jubilee Singers is one of the few bright spots in the otherwise grim African American history post-Reconstruction. In 1846 the American Missionary Association (AMA) was founded then in the years to come the AMA chartered seven colleges and schools of theology. One of those colleges became Fisk University in 1867. Similar to many other theological colleges, they soon had serious financial problems. George Leonard White, their treasurer and music teacher realised that many of the students were gifted singers, so the best were hand-picked as a choir to perform at carefully selected concerts to raise funds for the University. At first their music was mostly classical arrangements of the original spirituals (probably more 'acceptable' to audiences that were not ready for the "irregular rhythms, rhapsodic singing, rasping voices and bodily movement" of the true spirituals). After a slow start with little financial return they soon gained popularity and George White gave them the name The Jubilee Singers [a reference to the Old Testament "Year of Jubilee" from the Book of Leviticus], later becoming the Fisk Jubilee Singers. As their music became more popular they introduced more of the "wild melodies" of the true spirituals, making them the centrepiece of their performances. They toured all over the United States to great acclaim from blacks and whites, even performing for General Ulysses Grant. They also toured the British Isles including a private concert for Queen Victoria. Attendees at other UK concerts included the Prince and Princess of Wales and Prime Minister William Gladstone.  http://www.earlygospel.com/eg-ori2.gif Fisk Jubilee Singers, 1890s  The Fisk Jubilee Singers were most influential; within two years of their first concert there were dozens of imitators, everyone wanted to be part of the Jubilee phenomenon. But what they sang were not the spirituals being sung in the African American churches, they sang classically arranged spirituals, music that included spiritual-like lyrics, almost always upbeat and 'more lively' in tempo than the original spiritual: the jubilee song.  Minstrelsy  Library of Congress CollectionA second phenomenon that directly affected the survival of the spirituals was the black-face minstrel tradition. During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries [there is great debate when minstrelsy began] groups of mostly white men, their faces painted black, began staging concerts featuring "authentic" African American music from the South. Free blacks and former slaves also began forming their own troupes shortly after the Civil War (most notably the Georgia Minstrels), enriching the music with their culture and traditions. Blackface minstrelsy in the pre-radio era soon became the most popular form of entertainment in the United States (and remained so until early in the 20th century), particularly for poor white Americans who were entertained by this rich African American culture for the first time. Indeed, minstrelsy became America's first successful cultural export being very popular throughout Europe. During the 1870s different troupes, both black and white, began adding spirituals to their repertoire, however religious songs became more prevalent with African American minstrel groups, as the acknowledged 'true' experts on slave life from which the religious songs originated.  At the beginning of the 20th century the minstrel show's popularity faded everywhere except rural areas in the deep South, being replaced by Tin Pan alley and vaudeville. What minstrelsy did during it's long reign was to give African Americans the chance to perform mainly spirituals before a variety of audiences. Indeed minstrelsy and jubilee singing both preserved and changed spirituals, paving the way, in time, for gospel music. Whilst the true spirituals continued to be sung in rural churches, the changing of spirituals occurred where the needs of the people changed, in the urban cities, in what was the early stages of gospel music.  The Black Exodus North  The 'Great Migration of African Americans from South to North' began as a trickle in the latter years of the nineteenth century, becoming a flood by World War 1. An estimated five million rural southern African Americans migrated to the northern cities, mainly to get away from the intensifying black oppression and natural disasters in the South to the increasing employment opportunities for blacks in the northern cities. Within this migration were the musical refugees, carrying with them their sacred and secular traditions, who favoured Chicago, Detroit, Washington DC, New York and Philadelphia, helping to feed the evolution of gospel music in the cities.  Barbershop Quartets  At the same time as the mass migration north, a new form of quartet singing became very popular, that of the Barbershop Quartet. Barbershops, usually owned by blacks and open long hours, were congenial meeting places where blacks could congregate in their spare time and express their natural inclination to sing, or more exactly to harmonise, both sacred and secular music. Barbershop harmonising quartets became extremely popular with both black and white communities, with many of them being top selling recording artists of the day.  The Pentecostals  With the influx of rural African Americans to the unfamiliar urban communities came the need for a new religion. The rural black immigrants were more comfortable in the many storefront Sanctified churches blossoming throughout the inner cities, being more in common with the rural churches of the South. The emotional nature of Sanctified/Holiness-Pentecostal traditions had a strong appeal to blacks already accustomed to highly charged modes of worship. The new Pentecostal churches were essentially providing a religion for the socially underprivileged, a natural attraction for the southern African Americans. They appealed to people who were not attuned to sophisticated church music, encouraging extensive hand clapping, foot stamping (descending from the 'shout') and the use of musical instruments (such as drums, tambourines and guitars) in their services. Their hymns and songs were also heavily based on the 'call and response' fashion - all very familiar to southern African Americans. The Pentecostal churches were places of refuge for the weary hard-working blacks. The shouts, the rhythmic chanting, the foot stomping, the preaching, the singing, the hand claps, the personal participation all made for an intense emotional experience. It reminded the southern rural blacks of the brush arbor churches and was a musical release from all the hard work in a strange land. It was a piece of home.  Jack-Leg Preachers and Evangelists  Document Records: Storefront & Streetcorner Gospel 1927 - 1929 DOCD-5054Itinerant singing street preachers in the urban communities were important missionaries in the evolution of gospel music and an important feature of religious life in the lower economic groups.  The term 'jack-leg preacher' refers to someone with little education or a regular church, but with a strong call to preach. They would mostly preach to spontaneous congregations on the streets or start up small storefront churches of their own. Some of the greatest religious street performers were Blind Willie Johnson, Washington Phillips, A.C. and Blind Mamie Forehand, Rev. F.W. McGee, Rev. Edward Clayborn ("The Guitar Evangelist"), Sam Jones, Luther Magby, and of course there were many others, many of whom probably better classified simply as 'evangelists'. Because they sang in all kinds of weather, their voices were rough and raspy and this became the accepted norm and much-admired standard for succeeding gospel singers. The success of the recorded music and sermons of jack-leg preachers (and their "chair-backer" counterparts who were in established churches, such as Rev. J.M. Gates) even attracted many blues singers to record religious songs as well, such as Blind Lemon Jefferson, Charlie Patton, Barbeque Bob , Blind Roosevelt Graves and Blind Joel Taggart.  Emergence of Spiritual and Gospel Music Broadcast on the Radio  The first radio station was launched in 1920 in Pennsylvania, USA, but it was other nations such as the UK that introduced public service use of radio. The USA almost immediately latched on to the immense potential of commercial use of the medium and soon commercial radio stations mushroomed across the States. From a commercial perspective, the mass target audience were white, English-speaking Americans, those who were able to afford radios. Minority groups such as foreign language-speaking or African-Americans were not considered to be part of mainstream radio for some time. Commercial radio, by default, possessed one of the most effective policies of racial discrimination. Blacks did feature in radio dramas and situation comedies, but were readily stereotyped as simpletons; illiterate 'niggers'. There was however one field where the black was unquestionably superior, and that was of course music. As musicians, blacks contributed to radio from the early 20's. African-American dance orchestras, jazz bands, vaudeville shows and religious choirs were regularly featured, but black-oriented radio didn't come about until the 40's. African-Americans were simply seen as an unprofitable consumer market.  Jack L. CooperAfrican-Americans themselves tried to produce black-oriented programs and there were several instances across the States, but it was Jack L. Cooper who was the real father of black broadcasting. He produced the "All Negro Hour" on the small WSBC radio station in Chicago, sponsored by a group of morticians, broadcasting on a Sunday afternoon with a live audience. [Footnote: Cooper had many other innovative ideas for broadcasting; he was the first to intersperse comments and announcements with the record playing, thus inventing the concept of the disc jockey]. The "All Negro Hour" was a great success and Cooper grew his air time and attracted many other sponsors. His shows were aired on Sunday mornings, afternoons and evenings, and with strong financial backing from Chicago's main religious institutions, it was estimated that black church services, spirituals and gospel music reached into half of Chicago's black homes. Building on this, Cooper developed his programs even further across several radio stations. He stands today as the inventor of the entertainment-religion-service format that was to become standard in African-American radio. The example set by Cooper encouraged other African-American radio entrepreneurs. Radio stations began to recognise the growing importance of appealing to black listeners, brought about by three factors, firstly after World War II America could no longer afford (openly) to function as a racist country, secondly, the rise of television initially attracting mainly white audiences which made blacks a natural target for radio and thirdly, by this time there was a growing black consumer market. Black-oriented radio blossomed.  **Gospel Music Styles**  Spirituals  Spirituals (or Negro spirituals) are religious folk songs ('work songs' and 'field hollers') developed by black American slaves, who applied African musical traditions to Christian themes. Many Negro spirituals follow a simple call-and-response, making them suitable for singing both in church and while at work in the fields. Whilst primarily expressions of religious faith, some may also have served as socio-political protests veiled as assimilation to white American culture. Although numerous rhythmical and sonic elements of Negro spirituals can be traced to African sources, Negro spirituals are a musical form that is indigenous and specific to the religious experience in the United States of Africans and their descendants. They are a result of the interaction of music and religion from Africa with music and religion of European origin.  Traditional gospel  Traditional gospel, sometimes referred to as black gospel, was codified by the composer and singer Thomas A. Dorsey in the 1930s and generally features a large church choir, often fronted by one or more soloists. Traditional gospel has been the jumping-off point for a number of other styles.  Blues gospel (or 'gospel blues' in it's more accepted form)  Gospel blues is a blues-based form of gospel music (a combination of blues guitar and evangelistic lyrics). Notable gospel blues performers include Thomas A. Dorsey (the "founder" of gospel blues), Blind Willie Johnson, Sister Rosetta Tharpe and Reverend Gary Davis. Blues musicians such as Blind Lemon Jefferson, Charley Patton, Sam Collins, Josh White, Blind Boy Fuller, Blind Willie McTell, Bukka White, Sleepy John Estes and Skip James have recorded a fair number of Gospel and religious songs, these were often commercially released under a pseudonym. Additionally, by the late 1950s and 1960s some musicians had become devote, or even practicing clergymen, this was the case for musicians such as [Reverend Robert Wilkins](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Wilkins) and [Ishman Bracey](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ishman_Bracey).  Southern gospel  Southern gospel, as its name implies, has its origins in the South-eastern United States. Sometimes called "quartet music" due to the original all male, tenor-lead-baritone-bass quartet make-up and dependence on strong harmonies, Southern gospel is music whose lyrics are written to express either personal or a communal faith regarding biblical teachings and Christian life, as well as (in terms of the varying music styles) to give a Christian alternative to mainstream secular music. Because it grew out of the musical traditions of rural white people in the South, drawing much of its creative energy from the southern Holiness movement churches it is sometimes called "White Southern gospel or "White gospel", to differentiate it from Black gospel.  Progressive Southern gospel  Progressive Southern gospel is an American music genre that has grown out of Southern gospel. It ischaracterized by its blend of traditional Southern gospel instrumentation with elements of modern Country and pop music. Hints of other styles are frequently employed in the mix as well. In some progressive Southern gospel, you can hear a touch of Cajun, Celtic, Bluegrass, or even Southern rock.  Country gospel  Also known as Christian country or white gospel, country gospel is a cross of traditional spirituals with country and Appalachian folk music. Contemporary country gospel, however, has progressed over the years into a mainstream country sound with inspirational or positive country lyrics.  Contemporary gospel  Contemporary gospel, pioneered in the 1980s, is a more polished version of traditional gospel, drawing influences from modern R & B, jazz, blues and even hip-hop. Most contemporary gospel is recording in a slick, radio-ready format and musically most resembles "urban" music.  Bluegrass gospel  Bluegrass gospel music is rooted in American mountain music. Bluegrass gospel is classed as a third subgenre of Bluegrass (the other two being "Traditional Bluegrass" and "Progressive Bluegrass"). Many bluegrass artists incorporate gospel music into their repertoire. Distinctive elements of this style include Christian lyrics, soulful three- or four-part harmony singing, and sometimes playing instrumentals. A cappella choruses are popular with bluegrass gospel artists, though the harmony structure differs somewhat from standard barbershop or choir singing.  Soul gospel  Soul gospel was a variation on black gospel pioneered in the 1950s by a number of church quartets, including the Soul Stirrers and the Pilgrim Travelers, as well as solo artists, including Aretha Franklin. While religious in subject matter, soul gospel was marked by its raw, often sexually charged display of emotion. A precursor to Southern soul, many soul gospel artists, such as Sam Cooke, one-time lead of the Soul Stirrers, crossed over into mainstream, secular success.  Celtic gospel  Celtic gospel music is a hybrid of traditional southern gospel music infused with Celtic influences. The songs are usually derived from black gospel, but the arrangement is usually distinctly Celtic. Celtic gospel is particularly popular in Ireland.  Reggae gospel  Another hybrid form, reggae gospel is musically identical to reggae, with singers making use of the traditional off-beat accenting endemic to the genre, but the lyrics substitute Rastafarianism for Christianity. Reggae gospel is seldom found outside of Jamaica. | | Sources (see also [Bibliography](http://www.earlygospel.com/eg-bibliography.htm))  "People Get Ready! A New History of Black Gospel Music",Robert Darden, Continuum Publishing, New York, 2004  "The Music of Black Americans - A History", Eileen Southern, W. W. 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Gospel music is the most American of American music and the veritable soundtrack of black America. Born in the trauma of the 1930s, nurtured in the dramatic shifts of the 1940s and 50s, validated during the uncertainties of the 1960s and 70s, and complicated amid the technological advances of the 1980s and 90s, it has wonderfully articulated the hopes, fears, struggles, and joys of generations of blacks. As the root of R&B, Soul, and Rock, it is perhaps the most influential American musical genre, having launched the careers of countless singers past and present. Gospel music is the most authentically black cultural expression and the most glorious music on earth with a sound and a feeling all its own.

Coming up with a list of the best gospel songs is a near impossible task, so this list of 10 represent the most significant in terms of music and lyrical quality, originality, innovation, and most important, how they conform to the classic understanding of gospel music, which is “good news.” They not only have the gospel sound, but also the “spirit” of gospel!

TAKE MY HAND, PRECIOUS LORD (1932): Written by former bluesman, Thomas A. Dorsey, this song is perhaps the iconic gospel song and has set the musical and thematic tone for all gospel music. The melody is from a 19th century hymn, but Dorsey wrote the lines in bereavement over the deaths of his first wife and child. One of the most recorded gospel songs in history, “Precious Lord” has been covered by everyone from Nina Simone to Chaka Khan. Four years after Mahalia Jackson sang it at the funeral of Martin Luther King, Jr., Aretha Franklin sang it at Jackson’s funeral.

MOVE ON UP A LITTLE HIGHER (1947): Pastor and composer W. Herbert Brewster wrote this other iconic gospel song which became gospel music’s first bone fide “hit,” selling 8 million copies. Now in the National Recording Registry and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, it is one of the most celebrated songs in gospel history.

HOW I GOT OVER (1951): The relatively sad life of Clara Ward did not prevent her from writing one of the most uplifting gospel songs. Ward was inspired to write the song after a racist incident while traveling in the South with her group The Ward Singers. The two best-known versions of it are Mahalia Jackson’s 1961 recording and Aretha Franklin’s 1972 recording on the now classic album “Amazing Grace.”

I’M TOO CLOSE (1953): A favorite of Ray Charles, Professor Alex Bradford was one of the first great “showmen” of gospel and one of the most influential male gospel singers in the Post-WWII era. He wrote and performed this song, which became a huge hit in the early 1950s. The bluesy cadence of the song spoke of perseverance and longsuffering on one’s journey to heaven. Bradford’s singing ranged from a husky baritone to a sweet, sweet falsetto, and he influenced many R&B, Soul, Rock and Pop artists. While he’s known as the “Little Richard of gospel,” it is more accurate to call Little Richard the “Alex Bradford of Rock and Roll.”

TOUCH THE HEM OF HIS GARMENT (1956): Sam Cooke, gospel’s first “sex symbol,” quickly wrote this song on his way to a scheduled recording session with his group The Soul Stirrers. It is one of the finest examples of male quartet singing during the “Golden Era” of gospel. The majestic vocal harmonizing is characteristic of so many of the quartets of that time.

OH, HAPPY DAY (1967): Set to the tune of an 18th century English hymn, this song is a perfect example of a hymn that has been “gospelized.” It was recorded live in 1967 but picked up by radio station KSAN in 1969 and soon became an international hit. The cheery tune of deliverance and salvation rang out against the backdrop of the Vietnam War and racial strife.

WHOLY HOLY (1971): Marvin Gaye co-wrote this song of faith and peace and included it on the magnificent album “What’s Going On.” One year later Aretha Franklin transformed it into a gospel classic, complete with gospel vocals, a choir lead by the legendary James Cleveland, organ and piano. The result was a chilling, near otherworldly rendition of Gaye’s song.

MARY, DON’T YOU WEEP (1972): Although this song dates back to the slave era, recounting the biblical story of Lazarus being razed from the dead, it has also been “gospelized” and is now an undisputed part of the gospel canon. First recorded by Inez Andrews and The Caravans in 1958, the most familiar version is Aretha Franklin’s 1972 recording.

I. O. U. ME (1987): While not the greatest of the 1980s gospel songs, this one is perhaps the best example of the artistic expansions and technological advances happening in gospel music during the time, which often blurred the lines between secular and sacred. Written by famed producer Keith Thomas, it was recorded by Be Be and Ce Ce Winans, two members of the Winans family, widely acclaimed as “the first family of gospel.” It topped the R&B and gospel charts and won numerous awards.

STAND (1996): No matter what you may think of controversial minister and singer Donnie McClurkin, he personifies vocal power. A protégé of Andre Crouch and the Winans family, McClurkin wrote and performed this anthem to faith, courage, and endurance which catapulting him to fame. Oprah Winfrey brought attention (and massive sales) to the song when she proclaimed it her “favorite CD in the world.” It is indeed a superb, modern example of the gospel tradition, and likely will “stand” the test of time.

Gospel music is moving into a new era of change, but I suspect this most American of American music will continue to be the means by which we express our biggest hopes, fears, struggles, and joys.

# The 10 Best Gospel Songs: The Soul Of American Music

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**By** [**Wallace Best, Ph.D.**](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/author/wallace-best-phd)

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