

# Say HALLELUJAH! to GOSPEL

Born of the spirituals sung during the times of slavery, gospel holds a special place in the American music scene and has many branches and variations.

**G**ospel music has influenced some of America's biggest musical artists, from Aretha Franklin and Elvis Presley, to Ray Charles, Mary J. Blige, Mariah Carey and many more. Africans brought to America carried with them their sacred musical traditions, incorporating strong percussive beats, fluid harmonies, repetitive patterns, and call-and-response common in West African cultures (where a leader sings a line and others sing back). But as slaves in the New World, they were not allowed to play African instruments nor sing their traditional songs. So instead, they created new songs that, while influenced by African music, became individually American.

By this time, the church services slaves attended with their masters taught them about Christianity—teachings that brought them hope for a life beyond their oppression. Slaves were sometimes allowed to worship unsupervised, and for them, the church became a refuge for their creative and emotional expression. And where slave owners didn't allow participation in worship services, slaves met in secret. It was during these worship meetings that they developed songs inspired by Christian teachings and subjects. These new songs became known as anthem music, later referred to as "spirituals." Here in the South, where the largest population of black slaves lived, the precursor to gospel music was born and flourished.

Spirituals became largely sung outside of church. Some historians argue that these songs were also coded protests between slaves about freedom and sometimes even directions on how to escape to the Underground Railroad that led to the North. Songs, like "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," "Wade in the Water," and others are religious in

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nature, but are believed to refer to the Underground Railroad.

After slavery was abolished in 1865, some African Americans enrolled in school. At Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, one of the first universities for African Americans, the Fisk Jubilee Singers were formed. They sang negro spirituals and toured America and internationally to great success.

As time went on, spirituals gained more exposure not only with black Americans, but also with white Americans, exposure gained through traveling shows and the easy access the public had to sheet music. Spirituals were largely embraced and went on to influence white religious music (later to be known as southern or country gospel) as well as the popular contemporary music of the day. These early forms of gospel led to the creation of secular forms of music, mainly R&B, and later jazz and rock & roll, which in turn, over time, influenced the stylings of gospel music.



As African Americans branched out from the South to various urban centers in the North, the influence of spirituals spread. Black churches factioned off into different denominations. Pentecostal churches like Holiness and Sanctified became popular, and their congregants sang, shouted, and danced to exhaustion. The popularity of these churches and their intensity in musical worship helped transform gospel music to the next level.

The term gospel is from an old English translation of the Latin for "good news" and refers to the New Testament of the Christian bible. It has long referred to the music of black churches. However, "spirituals" was a more commonly used term until a man many call the Father of Contemporary Gospel brought the word "gospel" to the mainstream musical vocabulary in the years that followed World War II.

Thomas A. Dorsey was a former blues musician who had lost his way from the church. After he recommitted his life to God, he put his musical talents to work, becoming a prolific composer, penning the well-loved work "Take My Hand, Precious Lord." He insisted that this form of music be called "gospel," a new form of black American music inconsistent with the spirituals of pre-Civil War days and all that they implied.

Dorsey was a savvy businessman who became the first African

American to start and own a music publishing company. Not only did he publish his own music, but he sought out other compositions to publish as well, and enlisted the efforts of singers Sallie Martin and Mother Willie Mae Ford Smith to help him promote his music in churches across the country.

He also became a well-known promoter of choirs, soloists and quartets, not only to churches, but also to secular society. He was the first to advertise and charge admission to his acts, a controversial notion at the time.

Through Dorsey's promotion, gospel music infiltrated the mainstream, while religious radio stations popped up all over the country. Until this time, gospel music singers and choirs were not entertainers of superstar status. Dorsey changed all that when he launched the careers of several young artists, namely New Orleans-born Mahalia Jackson, the reigning queen of gospel music.

In the late 1940s, Jackson's single "Move on Up a Little Higher" made her a virtual overnight success. Demand for the single was so great, stores couldn't keep it in stock, making it one of the best-selling gospel records of all time. A crossover hit, Jackson became a fixture on radio and television, and before long purists were protesting her music as leaning too far toward common pop music. But Jackson's fans were undeterred. Her lush contralto voice and blues-infused tones affected people so deeply, some commented that her voice made you feel like the Spirit had truly moved through you. To this day, more than 30 years after her death, she is still considered to be the greatest gospel singer who ever lived.

Many pioneers of gospel music emerged in the 20th century. Though it's impossible to name them all, no story is complete without mentioning Rev. James Cleveland. Considered by most to be the King of Gospel, Cleveland sang in the choir at the Pilgrim Baptist Church in Chicago where Dorsey worked as the minister of music. Cleveland became an accomplished composer and choral director famous for his jazzy arrangements and use of large choirs and intricate harmonies. He won four GRAMMYS and his recording of "Peace Be Still" stayed on the gospel charts for 15 years! But perhaps one of Cleveland's most lasting accomplishments is his founding of the Gospel Music

Workshop of America, the largest gospel music convention in the world.

Contemporary gospel artists often put a new twist on the sacred genre. Kirk Franklin, a rap gospel artist, is known for combining urban beats and rhythms with his melodic spoken words, a great draw for the young and hip. Richard Smallwood and his choir combine traditional gospel with overtones of classical music, which makes for a beautiful sonic landscape. Witness the jazzy arrangements of vocal group Take 6, the danceable rhythms of Yolanda Adams, or the R&B-focused modern sounds of CeCe Winans. If you are partial to a foot-stompin', hand-clappin' choir, John P. Kee and the New Life Choir or Sounds of Blackness will get you up out of your seat.

With its many branches, gospel music has influenced numerous artists throughout popular music, in country and rock & roll, and derivative forms of music such as in R&B and soul. Aretha Franklin, Ray Charles, Elvis Presley, James Brown, Faith Hill, Whitney Houston, Little Richard, Alison Krauss, Wynonna Judd, and so many others crafted their sound from early experiences singing gospel. So great was gospel's influence on popular music in the middle of the last century that singer Mahalia Jackson was once quoted as saying, "Rock & roll was stolen out of the Sanctified Church." Even Little Richard's wild, animated performances of songs like "Good Golly Miss Molly" and "Tutti Frutti" were gospel influenced, though quite controversial in their day.

Gospel music has taken on various forms through the latter half of the 20th century and into the new millennium, and today it is often referred to as the main umbrella under which all con-

temporary Christian music sits. The all-encompassing term "gospel" includes both black and white gospel (also known as southern or country gospel), Christian pop, rock and rap, and even classical gospel.

Still, the music one thinks of when hearing the word "gospel" are the songs with deep vibratos, soulful vocals, moving har-

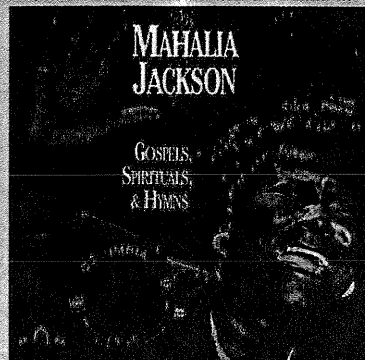
monies, uplifting messages, and often contagious rhythms. The phenomenon begun by black slaves centuries ago and nurtured by African American church goers is a decidedly American creation, unique and ever-evolving, still influencing popular music, and now enjoyed by enthusiasts all over the world. ■

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## LISTEN UP

### **Mahalia Jackson: *Gospels, Spirituals, and Hymns***

The queen of gospel music and one of the most powerful voices of the 20th century. Even decades after her death, Jackson's bluesy style, rich contralto, and timeless appeal make her a true gospel superstar.



### **Thomas A. Dorsey: *Precious Lord: The Great Gospel Songs of Thomas A. Dorsey***

This pioneer in modern gospel helped launch the careers of Mahalia Jackson and other greats. The appeal of his works crossed all race barriers in the 1930s.

### **Rev. James Cleveland: *Get Right Church***

Recognized for his soulful, jazz-infused arrangements, Rev. Cleveland founded the Gospel Workshop of America and helped to launch the careers of many young artists.

### **The Winans Family: *Great Family of Gospel***

The first family of contemporary gospel has enjoyed crossover success with their modern, urban stylings and tight harmonies.

### **Kirk Franklin: *The Rebirth of Kirk Franklin***

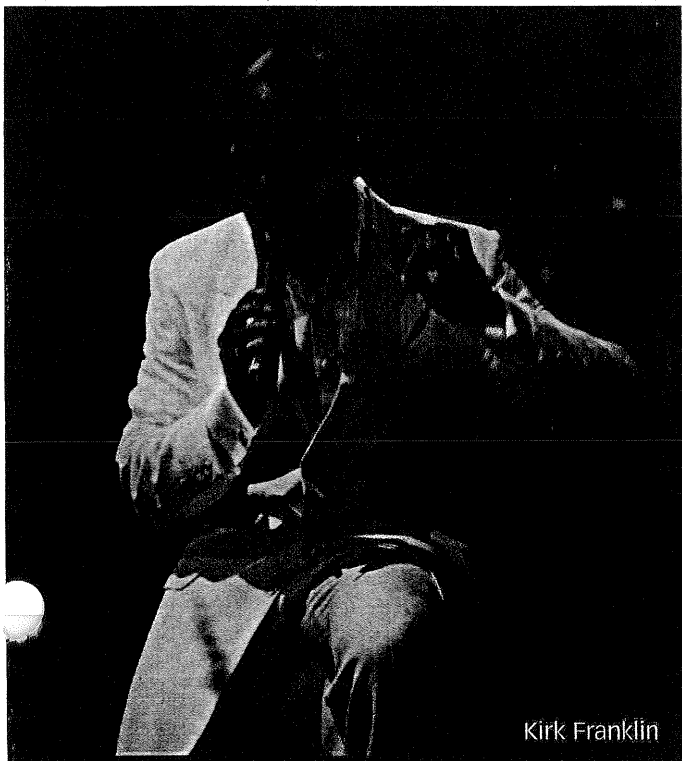
1993's *Kirk Franklin & The Family* became the first gospel debut to go platinum. Primarily a melodic rapper, Kirk has crossover appeal.

### **Yolanda Adams: *The Essential Yolanda Adams***

This former schoolteacher spreads the Word through groove-laden gospel music that is heavily R&B-influenced.

### **Sounds of Blackness: *The Very Best of Sounds of Blackness***

With several supremely talented soloists, a 40-member choir, and 10-piece band, Sounds of Blackness feature impressive productions, rich harmonies, and unique Afro-centric compositions.



Courtesy of Hopeville Tour

Kirk Franklin