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The Gospel Truth about the Negro Spiritual

By Randye Jones

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What is the difference between Negro spirituals and gospel music?

It seemed like a simple question, but it was immediately apparent that the answer was far from simple. First, it is complicated by the fact that both exist because of a deep-seated need to express faith in song.

Secondly, one genre has used the other for source material. Also, the history of one genre blends into the other.

The times and environment in which the spiritual was nurtured were starkly different than that of black gospel music. Gospel music is clearly rooted in the spiritual, and Gospel musicians have drawn on the spiritual for source material. But are gospel songs simply "jazzed-up" spirituals? What is the "gospel truth?"

The Negro Spiritual: From Cotton Field to Concert Hall

Negro spirituals are songs created by the Africans who were captured and brought to the United States to be sold into slavery. This stolen race was deprived of their languages, families, and cultures; yet, their masters could not take away their music.

Over the years, these slaves and their descendents adopted Christianity, the religion of their masters. They re-shaped it into a deeply personal way of dealing with the oppression of their enslavement. Their songs, which were to become known as spirituals, reflected the slaves' need to express their new faith.

The songs were also used for secret communication without the knowledge of their masters. This was particularly the case when a slave planned to escape bondage via the Underground Railroad.

Spirituals were created extemporaneously and were passed orally from person to person. They were improvised as suited the singers. There are approximately 6,000 spirituals; however, the oral tradition

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of the slaves' ancestors—and the prohibition against slaves learning to read or write—meant that the actual number of songs is unknown.

With the end of the American Civil War in 1865, most former slaves distanced themselves from the music of their captivity. The spiritual seemed destined to be relegated to slave narratives or to a handful of historical accounts by whites who had tried to notate the songs they heard.

The performance of spirituals was reborn when a group of students from newly founded Fisk University of Nashville, Tennessee, began to tour to raise money for the financially strapped school. The Fisk Jubilee Singers carried spirituals to parts of the U.S. that had never heard Negro folksongs, and they performed before royalty during tours of Europe in the 1870's. Their success encouraged other Black colleges and professional singers to form touring groups. Collections of plantation songs were

published to meet the public demand.

While studying at the National Conservatory of Music, singer and composer Harry T. Burleigh came under the influence of the Czech composer Antonín Dvořák. Dvořák visited the United States in 1892 to serve as the conservatory's new director and to encourage Americans to develop their own national music. Dvořák learned of the spiritual from Burleigh and later recommended that American composers draw upon the spiritual for their inspiration.

In 1916, Burleigh wrote "Deep River," for voice and piano. His setting is considered to be the first work of its kind to be written specifically for performance by a trained singer.

"Deep River" and other spiritual settings became very popular with concert performers and recording artists, both black and white. It was soon common for recitals to end with a group of spirituals. Composers published numerous settings of Negro spirituals specifically for performance on the concert stage, and solo and choral singers successfully recorded them for commercial release.

Additionally, the spiritual has given birth to a number of other American music genres, including Blues, Jazz and gospel. Spirituals played a major role of buoying the spirits of protesters during the Civil Rights Era of the 1950's and 1960's.

The Music

Spirituals fall into three basic categories:

Call and response - A "leader" begins a line, which is then followed by a choral response; often sung to a fast, rhythmic tempo ("Ain't That Good News," "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot")

Slow and melodic - Songs with sustained, expressive phrasing, generally slower tempo ("Balm in Gilead," "Calvary")

Fast and rhythmic - Songs that often tell a story in a faster, syncopated rhythm ("Ev'ry Time I Feel the Spirit," "Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho")

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The lyrics dealt with characters from the Old Testament (Daniel, Moses, David) who had to overcome great tribulations and with whom the slaves could easily identify. From the New Testament, the slaves most closely identified with Jesus Christ, who they knew would help them.

Since the rhythm—once established—was key to their songs, the singers would add or delete syllables in words to make them fit the song. Pioneers of spiritual art songs often chose to use dialect, the manner slaves pronounced words, in their settings.

Early vocal settings reflected the goals of pioneering composers to retain as much of the "feel" of the original spiritual as was possible. Choral settings were ideally performed a cappella, and solo vocal pieces allowed the use piano accompaniment for support of the singer. They mainly composed in a steady 2/4 or 4/4 meter.

Over the years, however, settings have become more tonally and rhythmically complex in the vocal line and accompaniment. This approach presents more technical challenges to the performers, and it places greater responsibility upon the performers to be sensitive to the original intent of the music.

Gospel Music: "Good News" in the City

The gospel music of the African American had its beginnings during the years following the Civil War. Many newly freed slaves began seeking a new life away from the rural setting of the Southern plantation. They sought opportunities for better education and employment to the north and west.

From a religious standpoint, the freedmen took two very distinct paths. Some formed churches affiliated with established white denominations and used the same formal, structured liturgies. They rejected the spiritual in its original form because the songs not only reminded them of their former conditions, but the songs did not fit well into the service. They chose to sing hymns by Dr. Isaac Watt, John Wesley and Richard Allen, though they sang them with a favor that hinted at their African roots.

Predominately in the South, the second path led poorer, less well-educated African Americans to form their own Pentecostal churches. From around 1870 until the turn of the century, hymns began to appear that combined the syncopation, call-and-response, and improvisation of Black music with the formal structure of the white hymn. These "gospel hymns" addressed the desires of African Americans who wanted songs that more profoundly expressed their belief in the "Good News" found in the four Gospels of the New Testament. Best known of these composers was Charles A. Tindley, a Methodist minister who wrote such hymns as "I'll Overcome Someday" and "We'll Understand It Better By and By."

Tindley and his contemporaries copyrighted and published their music in collections such as *Gospel Pearls* and *New Songs of Paradise*. They also promoted their works in concerts and events. Some churches allowed, for the first time, the use of instruments such as the piano, drums and tambourine. Gospel performing forces during this period consisted either of male quartets or female gospel choirs.

In the early 20th century, many southern African Americans migrated north, carrying their music with them. Chicago became the center of gospel music in the 1930's with the arrival of Thomas A. Dorsey, the "Father of Gospel Music." Dorsey, who had a very successful career writing and performing with

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blues diva Ma Rainey, introduced blues elements to the sacred music he wrote. He went from church door to church door, gradually convincing ministers that this "devil's music" was suitable for their services. With the help of vocalists such as Sallie Martin and Mahalia Jackson, he recorded his songs and generated an international audience for his music. He composed over 400 songs in his career, including his most famous song, "Precious Lord, Take My Hand."

Many of Dorsey's contemporaries maintained secular and sacred professional lives. For example, Blues great Blind Lemon Jefferson was also known as Deacon L. J. Bates. Singing preachers recorded gospel "race records," and they visited urban congregations around America.

By the 1950's, gospel music had undergone more changes. Electric organ or guitars, brass and string instruments, and a variety of percussion instruments accompanied choirs that now included male singers. Male quartets performed with instrumental accompaniment and added one or two members to their groups to allow four-part harmony under the lead. Keyboardists were expected to improvise and to use a much greater range of chordal options to enhance songs. Prominent performers included Clara Ward, the Swan Silvertones, the Five Blind Boys of Mississippi, and Wings over Jordan. The Soul Stirrers, led by the suave singing style of Sam Cooke, brought in an entirely new audience—teenaged girls—to the world of gospel music.

Gospel performers recorded steadily to meet the growing demand for their music over the radio.

Unfortunately, as was the case for African Americans in popular music, they were rarely fairly compensated.

Gospel grew in prominence in other cities, especially Philadelphia, Detroit, St. Louis, Memphis, Birmingham, and New York. Performers took their music into locations outside the usual church venues. Mahalia Jackson sang at Carnegie Hall (1950), on the Ed Sullivan Show, and at the Newport Jazz Festival in 1958—Clara Ward and the Ward Singers had performed there the year before; the Caravans and the Dixie Hummingbirds appeared at the Apollo.

By the 1960's, gospel was performed in nightclubs, and gospel plays had come to Broadway. Singers like James Cleveland, Shirley Caesar, Aretha Franklin, the Mighty Clouds of Joy, and the Staples Singers reached prominence.

However, there was also a shift towards the popular music of the time that made gospel purists uncomfortable. Edwin Hawkins closed out the decade with his release of "Oh Happy Day," which combined the elements of gospel with those of Rhythm and Blues. Along with others in this new generation, such as Andrea Crouch and Richard Smallwood, he brought a new generation of listeners to gospel music.

Contemporary gospel has made further shifts over the years. The dominant gospel groups are made up of large choirs with soloists using amplified sound equipment designed for popular music venues. On college campuses across the country, students have created their own gospel groups. Churches that had resisted gospel music for decades finally have acquiesced and started gospel choirs. Choirs, such as Kirk Franklin's, have integrated Hip Hop into their sound.

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The popularity of gospel music is showing no signs of waning in the foreseeable future.

The Music

Early gospel hymns used the call-and-response of the spiritual, as well as syncopation and improvisation. The songs tended to be in 2/4 or 4/4 meter and use diatonic harmony.

By the 1930's, performers were far less restrained in their use of harmony, and vocalists and instrumentalists used more improvisation. The lead singer took a much more active role, singing whole verses while the other members of the ensemble repeated words or phrases behind the leader in harmony.

Bass singers, a staple in the 1920's, were replaced by the instrumental bass line by the 1950's. Mixed choirs consisted of soprano, alto and tenor or baritone.

From the 1970's onward, soloists began the song in the middle range of their voices and progressed to the farther ends of their ranges for dramatic effect. With the advent of rap gospel, the lead singer either speaks the text with choral and instrumental accompaniment or alternates between sung and spoken text.

So, What Is the Gospel Truth?

Spirituals often told stories about biblical characters and events. These folk songs were born in the rural regions of the American South, and their anonymous creators were inspired by the hardships of

slavery. These songs were usually created at the moment using call-and-response between a leader and the group. They were accompanied only by the slaves' clapping hands or stamping feet. The steady, usually duple, rhythm was the driving force in the song, so words were often modified to fit the beat. Additionally, spirituals had to be passed orally from person to person.

In contrast, gospel music rose primarily from cities of the North. The songs were accompanied first by keyboard instruments, then by percussion and later electric and electronic instruments. The words tend to focus on spreading the "Good News" of salvation. Gospel songs provided solace to those who faced low-paying jobs, poor housing, inadequate education, and ill-treatment. Both singer and instrumentalist were expected to improvise within the song.

Gospel music composers, even in the infancy of the genre, published and recorded their songs. However, like spirituals, most groups learned new gospel songs by rote. The progenitors of the spiritual had no means of marketing or selling their music; in the case of gospel music, Tindley, Dorsey and their successors made a concerted—and highly successful—effort to spread their musical message through commercial means. Spirituals flourished in the vacuum of the plantation, where the influence of other music styles was limited. Gospel music has regularly adapted elements of the secular popular music: Blues, Jazz, R&B, and most recently, Rap.

Despite these considerable differences, however, the most significant similarity persists. Both spirituals

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and gospel music address the need of a people to express their faith in a dynamic, musical way. Simply put, the "gospel truth" is that whether one wanted to "Steal Away to Jesus" or to ask, "Precious Lord, Take My Hand," a tormented soul found relief in a risen Savior.

Randy Jones is a native of Greensboro, North Carolina. She received her Bachelor of Arts degree in Music Education from Bennett College in Greensboro, NC, and the Master of Music degree in Vocal Performance from Florida State University, Tallahassee. She currently serves as a library manager at the George Washington University, Washington, D.C. She created and maintains the much cited Web site, Afrocentric Voices in Classical Music.

Enjoy Playing Gospel Music In Your Very Own Home

By IPRWire Staff Writer

For those who enjoy the rousing and spiritual sound of gospel music, learning to play gospel style songs can be an exciting undertaking. Many enjoy revisiting the days when the sound of music flowing from the doors of the church brought a smile to everyone listening.

Learning to play gospel music on the piano is a great way to share your favorite hymns with all members of your family. Or volunteer to play at church or for a friend's wedding. Gospel music can be shared anywhere with anyone, and it is universally recognized as a truly inspiring genre of music.

If you are thinking about learning to play music on the piano and are looking for a piano for yourself, or perhaps your child, you may be surprised to learn that there are several different types of pianos. Deciding the type of piano you will purchase or rent is a very important decision, especially if children are going to be playing. If your child has expressed an interest in playing the piano, and in particular gospel music, it is wise to find a good instrument fit for them.

The piano is a great instrument for children because it is relatively easy to learn. Pianos are also great for any age because you don't have to get a new instrument every time a child grows or progresses. Playing the piano is a great way to introduce your children into the world of music and having a piano in your home means many years of music are ahead.

Gospel music has its own style of chord patterns and arrangements that are most common. In order to master playing gospel, you have to know the right chords and be able to pick up melodies and notes by ear. Having the right learning tools to accomplish this is the biggest challenge. At Hear and Play, we offer a variety of lessons and learning tools that will get you started and well on your way to playing music by ear in no time. The rich sound of gospel is a sound that is very soothing to many people of all ages. Just think of the number of times you have sat in a church and listened to a soothing gospel song that made you feel better. Now you can duplicate this sound when you learn how to play gospel music in your own home.

Lessons for gospel music will take you from simple gospel songs to more complex ones in no time at all. You will soon find yourself playing for others.

Hear and Play is a professional website located at

, that teaches you how

to play the piano in just a few quick lessons. Contact us today to learn more.



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