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The Beginnings of Gospel Music in the Bay Area

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# African-American Traditional Arts and Folklife in Oakland and the East Bay

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Editor

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Dedicated to  
Bess Lomax Hawes  
Director of the National Endowment for the Arts Folk Arts Program (1978-1992)

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## The Beginnings of Gospel Music In the Bay Area<sup>1</sup>

By: *Jacqueline Cogdell DjeDje, Ph.D.*

The performance of gospel music in the Bay Area became prominent during the 1940s. Prior to the forties, hymns, concert spirituals, anthems, and European art music constituted the typical repertoire used in established black churches. An ensemble called the Oakland Colored Chorus that was formed in 1935 by William Elmer Keeton (a music teacher, conductor, and composer who arrived in Oakland in 1921) was well known in the area. On occasion, black college groups from the South as well as singing evangelists, professional quartets, and choruses visited the area. Also, large-scale community events took place at prominent churches or in city auditoriums. When the term gospel was used, it was generally applied only to “gospel preaching” or to hymns such as “Pass It On” or “Rock of Ages.”

The limited performance of gospel music in the Bay Area during the thirties can be attributed to several factors. The black population in northern California did not see a dramatic increase until the 1940s. Whereas other urban communities in the United States had a large influx of immigrants who brought in new cultural traditions, Bay Area residents maintained the same lifestyle that had existed in previous years. More importantly was the attitude of blacks who lived in the Bay Area. Betty Reid Soskin, a Berkeley record store-owner who has lived in the Bay Area since 1925, indicates that “during the twenties and thirties, the black

community in the Bay Area was small; everyone could be gotten into the Oakland Auditorium. We were spread all over, and we were not living in particular districts. So our lives were somewhat unreal in a lot of ways. We came together from all parts of the area socially by choice. We saw our connectedness as blacks. But there were no areas where we had to be in, there were no schools we had to attend. There wasn't a consciousness around church for black folks. It was something you did, but I don't remember it as being that profound.”

Between 1942 and 1945, more than 300,000 blacks settled in California. Most migrated from the western region of the South — Louisiana, Texas, Arkansas, and Oklahoma — seeking a different way of life and a better future, for many believed that obtaining a job in the wartime industry would lead to better socioeconomic conditions. By 1950, the black population in Oakland was twice the size of that in San Francisco.

When asked about the beginnings of gospel music in the Bay Area, Soskin states that it occurred “during the middle and late forties, because the whole gospel movement was imported along with the black population as people came in to deal with the war. But that happened very fast. For the most part, these were people who came from farms; people who had nothing to lose. But they did have a strong need for one another, a strong need to establish roots. So storefront churches



began to crop up all over the place. And gospel music came with that.”

While there is little written information concerning gospel music in the Bay Area, newspaper accounts do include mention of Lillian Glenn Smith of Dallas, Texas, who, by the late forties and fifties, had become a celebrity for her gospel music performances. Even though she sometimes sang on occasions when her husband (Rev. H.R. Smith, pastor of New Hope Baptist Church) preached, she became established as a solo artist and affiliated herself with Temple of Truth Baptist Church.

As a result of black migration, the social environment in the Bay Area during the fifties and sixties became quite different from what existed previously. Thus, activity associated with gospel music increased. The Bay Area did not attract established gospel music “stars” who permanently settled in the area. Rather, it was a setting where local talent was nurtured through the support it received and from visiting artists who served as models. However, a few of its residents did perform with noted gospel musicians; Charlie Mae Haynes was a member of the Sallie Martin Singers and Odessa Perkins became one of the Ward Singers during the 1960s.

Small groups and quartets dominated the gospel music community in the Bay Area from the late 1940s through the 1960s. Similar to other cities and towns around the country, the groups could be categorized into three types: 1) visiting artists, 2) local groups that were independent, and 3) church affiliated groups. While many of the visiting groups and artists came from Los Angeles (the J. Earle Hines Goodwill Singers, the Simmons-Akers Singers, and Cora Martin), performers from the Midwest and East also frequented the area: the Soul Stirrers, the Pilgrim Travelers, Mahalia Jackson, Clara Ward, the Davis Singers, the O’Neal Twins, Joe May, C.L. Franklin and daughter, Aretha.

A few local independent groups were established prior to their arrival in the Bay Area. The Paramount Singers, a men’s quartet, was originally formed in 1936 in Texas. When members moved to San Francisco, they reorganized in 1944. Other groups that were formed after arriving included the Nunley Singers (a female group from San Francisco) and Original Joy Spreaders of Oakland.



Paramount Singers; Photo courtesy of Paramount Singers

A large number of organizations were affiliated with Bay Area churches. Pastors initiated this trend during the late forties and early 1950s. James Lee Richards, who founded Evergreen Baptist Church in 1947, formed a women’s trio in 1950 called the Golden Echoes to do a fifteen minute morning radio broadcast with him on the Warner Brothers Station. He increased the size of the ensemble to six and in 1953 renamed it the J.L. Richards Specials. Using his group as a model, similar organizations came into existence in later years: the Dew’s Specials of San Francisco, the Macedonia Harmonettes, the Lathanettes, the St. Paul Specials and the Andrew Sisters.

Support organizations were critical to the survival of many of the groups in the Bay Area. A branch of the national Interdenominational Quartet Singers Alliance was established in Oakland during the late 1940s but in

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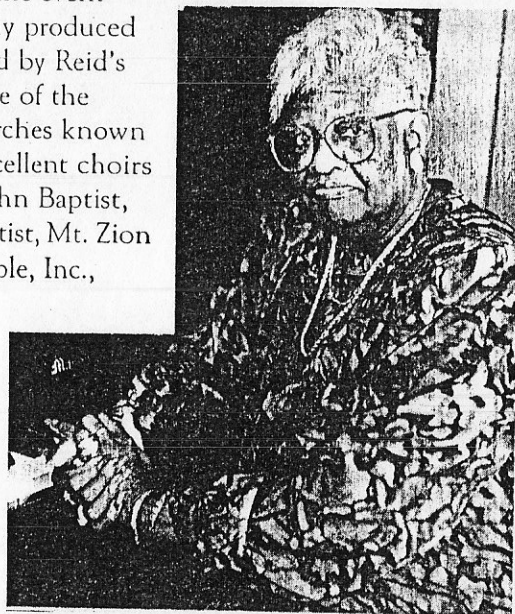
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1958, members of the organization voted unanimously to constitute itself the new America's Singers Association. The entire Bay Area was divided into several geographical units called Locals, and each Local was composed of its own quartets, solo artists and choirs. Groups from various Locals met monthly at different churches in the city for performances.

By the fifties and sixties, most churches in the Bay Area had gospel choirs, prompting the inception of a choir competition in 1954. Held annually at the Oakland Auditorium, the event was elaborately produced and sponsored by Reid's Records. Some of the Oakland churches known for having excellent choirs include St. John Baptist, Evergreen Baptist, Mt. Zion Spiritual Temple, Inc., Star Bethel Baptist, McGee Avenue Baptist, and the Temple of Truth Baptist.



Helen Stevens at the Piano

Photo by Jonathan Eubanks

Community choirs did not become established in the Bay Area until the late 1960s. The Voices of Christ founded by Helen Stephens in 1969 was one of the first

due in large part to the influence of James Cleveland's Gospel Music Workshop of America, which was founded in 1967.

By the 1960s, the Ephesians Church of God in Christ in Berkeley had become one of the major centers for gospel music in the area. This is where members of the Hawkins Family regularly worshipped and where Edwin Hawkins served as minister of music and choir director from the early sixties to the seventies. In 1967, Hawkins formed a 40-member group from members of Pentecostal churches in Berkeley, San Francisco, Oakland, San Jose, and Richmond, California, for the 1967 Annual Youth Congress of Church of God in Christ. In 1968, it was this group, then known as the Northern California State Youth Choir, that first recorded the legendary LP, *Let Us Go Into the House of the Lord*, which included the song, "Oh Happy Day." Most gospel performers regard the recording of "Oh Happy Day" as the springboard for the development of contemporary gospel music, and Hawkins is often acknowledged as the "Father of Contemporary Gospel."

Although the development of gospel music in the Bay Area may have had a slow beginning, the foundation that was laid in the forties provided the necessary impetus for expansion of the music in later years. Once introduced, gospel music received immediate acceptance because the sociocultural environment had changed to such a degree that there were institutions and individuals to support the tradition. Today, the Bay Area is considered to be one of the most important areas in the United States for the performance of gospel music because its own local "stars" have become world renown.

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