

Trouble Don't Last Always

The Legacy of KC's Black Gospel Blues

By Paul Wenske

Everyone knows Kansas City is famous for its jazz and blues. But the same forces that shaped these expressive musical forms also account for Kansas City's traditional gospel blues.

Like the blues, gospel music expresses the adversity faced by many African-Americans through history. But the ultimate message of black gospel blues is one of hope and overcoming trials, the promise that, like the old spiritual says: "Trouble Don't Last, Always."

Kansas City's contribution to the legacy of gospel music complements, and even rivals, the traditions that evolved in Chicago, Memphis, Detroit, New York and Los Angeles.

Yet, the role played by Kansas City's pioneer gospel community is not well documented. No single depository exists that collects this rich heritage. Records, photos and accounts are housed mainly in church collections, disparate archives and individual memories.

In addition, Kansas City's blues and jazz may have eclipsed gospel because those art forms catered to a commercial audience, while gospel singing was viewed more as a ministry best served in church.

Still, many of Kansas City's gospel luminaries performed on a national stage.

Etta Moten Barnett starred in movies, including a singing role in "Flying Down to Rio" with Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, and



Etta Moten Barnett went on to national and international fame after singing with the Jackson Jubilee Singers of Western University in Quindaro, KS.

was the first black female performer to sing at the White House.

Eva Jessye was choral director for George Gershwin's "Porgy and Bess" and led the choir at the 1963 March on Washington. Composer and critic Nora Holt became a figure in the Harlem Renaissance.

The Kansas City Melodyaires, a female gospel quartet featuring Mildred Clark and Genetter Bradley, gained national attention after singing at the Apollo Theatre in the 1960s. Composer and director Michael Charles led workshops and choirs across the nation, as well as in Kansas City.

Some former Kansas City gospel singers, like Marva Whitney and Johnnie Taylor, left their gospel roots to become national pop stars.

And today, pioneer groups, such as Alma Whitney and the Whitney Singers, the Heaven Bound Travelers and the Sensational Wonders, to name a few, continue to perform regionally.

Church Influence

Kansas City's gospel heritage traces, in part, back to the period of slavery, when Quindaro, Kan., was a stop on the Underground Railroad.

In 1862, Freedman School was founded in Quindaro to educate freed slaves. Later bought by the A.M.E. Church, it became Western University, a technical arts school known for providing blacks the best musical training west of the Mississippi River. It closed in the late 1930s.

In 1907, the school's charismatic choir director, Robert Jackson, formed the Jackson Jubilee Singers, who travelled the country performing classical music and spirituals. Moten Barnett, Jessye and Holt, were alumnae of the Jubilee Singers. Other graduates went on to be choir directors and instructors in the churches that served the growing African-American community.

Kansas City's central location as a railroad hub and meat-packing center made it a natural destination for African-Americans looking for better jobs and new lives.

By the early 1900s, the 18th and Vine community was the center of African American life, writes Charles E. Coulter, author of *Take up the Black Man's Burden*. Resi-

dents who endured segregation in white Kansas City found refuge in the churches.

New arrivals from the south brought with them a bluesy style of sanctified singing, with its rhythms, shouts and call-and-response rooted in field songs.

Rev. Tommy Arnick recalled taking a train north to Kansas City from southern Texas after being promised a job at a packinghouse and an audition with the Ruffin Brothers, a popular local gospel quartet.

“One of the Ruffin Brothers called me up and asked me, ‘you want a job?’ So I got on a train and come up here. There was a line outside the plant but the man that was hiring called my name. I went right in.”

Some churches initially frowned on the harder-edged gospel blues. But other churches, especially the Pentecostal, Missionary Baptist and Church of God in Christ denominations, embraced the emotionally expressive songs.

“Black Americans had to have something within that would give them a ray of hope,” said the Rev. James Tindall, Bishop of the Metropolitan Spiritual Church of Christ in Kansas City.

“These were songs of liberation,” he said.

Historian and author William Worley said “the music reflected the black culture of that time. It created a special experience that didn’t exist outside the church.”

Church leaders soon realized the music’s power to attract parishioners. “The music brought people into the church. It became a pivot-

al piece of the churches’ success, both spiritual and economic,” Worley said.

The music became so popular it couldn’t be contained in the churches alone. It spread to outside venues, many long since razed, such as the Ivanhoe Temple, the Lincoln Theatre, the Transit Union Worker’s Hall and one of the most beloved, the Cross of Christ.

The Cross of Christ, a cramped space upstairs from an auto mechanic’s garage at 18th and Lydia, became a gathering place for both local and national groups, where singers would compete for applause.

“You would plan and rehearse and lay out your clothes three weeks ahead knowing you had a program at the Cross of Christ,” recalled the late Michael Charles in an interview.

“There were no microphones. You had to sing loud and project your voice. You sang your heart out,” he said.

Musical crossroad

Kansas City’s central location also made it a destination for national touring groups.

“If you had to go east or west or north or south, you had to go through Kansas City,” said Chuck Haddix, jazz historian and director of the Marr Sound Archives at the University of Missouri-Kansas City.

In addition, Kansas City was the western turn around point on the Theatre Owners Booking Association circuit, a string of 80 theatres between New York and Kansas City.

So Kansas City became an entertainment center for gospel as well as jazz — two musical styles that share the same roots.

Haddix explains:

“When the preacher calls out and the congregation responds, it is really the building block of American blues and jazz.

“In jam sessions there is a dialogue. Maybe Dizzy Gillespie



The Street Hotel in the 18th and Vine district was one place where African-American musicians could stay while visiting and performing in Kansas City.



The Ruffin Brothers: (Front row: from left to right: Vermer L. Wright, Manuel Ruffin and Calvin Ruffin. Back row: from left to right: Tommie Arnick, Emory Ruffin, Thomas Ruffin and D.D. Miller)

calls out and Charlie Parker responds to that.”

By the mid-20s, blues and gospel were prevalent on 18th and Vine. And except for the message, the musical style was similar. Old 78-rpm records from that time feature gospel singers, accompanied by a rollicking piano, sounding much like Joe Turner belting out the blues.

One 18th and Vine entrepreneur sought to capture the sound. Winston Holmes opened the Winston Holmes Music Company in 1925.

Besides promoting such jazz greats as Bennie Moten and Hattie McDaniel, he launched his own Meritt label, one of the first to market to a black audience, and placed a Victrola outside his shop at 18th and Woodland to advertise the records he made in his back room.

“Winston tried his best to make the Meritt label go,” said Haddix. “But he could never get national distribution.”

His biggest success was recording Rev. J.C. Burnett performing “The Downfall of Nebuchadnezzar.”

The record proved so successful, that Columbia records persuaded Burnett to leave Meritt and record with them. Holmes sued for breach of contract, but he lost. In 1929, Holmes went out of business.

Growing Recognition

From the 1940s to the 1960s, arguably the golden age of traditional black gospel blues, Kansas City developed a number of recognized groups.

Michael Charles, who was musical director at both Metropolitan Spiritual Church and St. James

United Methodist Church, wrote one of the few histories of those years in 1987, in trying to develop a national gospel music fraternity.

The short but rich history documents local groups that gained regional and national fame, groups like the Whitney Singers, the Voices of Faith, the NuLight Singers, the Ray Manning Singers, the Dawna Ward Singers, the K.C. Clouds of Joy and the Wings of Grace rose to prominence.

Indeed, the popularity of Kansas City’s eclectic mix of groups and quartets attracted other performing groups, who attracted huge crowds. One could attend a battle of song featuring national touring groups like the Blind Boys of Alabama, the Dixie Hummingbirds, the Pilgrim Travelers and local groups such as the Dixie Wonders and the Ruffin Brothers.

Arnick recalls practicing for hours in preparation for these performances. He recalls one night singing with the Ruffin Brothers when “one woman got to shouting and she fainted. Another one got to shouting and they had to take her to the hospital. After that night we said we aren’t going to sing so hard. We don’t want to kill somebody.”

Even so, while Kansas City was a great place to be, it was difficult for local groups to make a name outside the city. For one thing, the big promoters, record labels and publishing companies were in Chicago, Los Angeles and New York City. Some groups did leave for greener pastures. The Kansas City Gospel Singers, a top quartet, moved to Los Angeles.

Traveling to gospel performances could be challenging. Segregation limited where a group could stay

and quartets that had day jobs had to limit their travel to weekends.

Creating a legacy

“People didn’t make money,” recalled Alma Whitney, leader of the Whitney Singers. “Being on the road was hard. Sometimes you got paid and sometimes you didn’t.” Whitney, who has been a gospel singer for more than 50 years, preferred spending more time in Kansas City where she earned a reputation developing youth gospel choirs.

Sherri Goff, whose mother, Mildred Clark, led the Kansas City Melodyaires, recalls how her mother taught her group to be self-sufficient on the road. “They learned how to change the oil, a flat tire, the different belts, so that if they broke down, they first could try to fix it themselves before they would call someone else for back up,” she said.

Persistence, however, garnered the Melodyaires national fame that eluded some others. Genetter Bradley, a former lead singer for the quartet, recalled their debut at the Apollo Theater.

The Sounds of Music?

Not everyone was a fan of the music.

Roy Wilkins, a *Kansas City Call* journalist and later a major civil rights leader, wrote in the paper:

“But the cruelest pain of all is that furnished by the horns of music stores which squeal ‘blues’ and ‘sermons’ from morning until night.

“There is at least one shop in the neighborhood which has an excellent machine and which plays

“You have 15 minutes to sell yourself,” she said. “And you have to do your very best.” The Melodyaires proved their stuff.

“People in the audience were reaching for you. They just wanted to touch you. They would be waiting for you to come out. You knew then you were stars.”

But after several successful years, Genetter Bradley also came home off the road, marrying James Bradley, who sang nationally with The Bright Stars.

As she tells it, “Jim said, ‘Genetter if you come home off the road, I’ll buy you a house. In those days, when you think about it, you’ve

latest and favorite releases to advertise its business—and it is a good advertisement.

“But for this one, there are a half dozen which persist in ‘blues’ and sermons from preachers no one has ever heard of and on subjects one cannot find in the Bible.

“These sermons consist mostly of moanings and groaning and hysterical unintelligible yelling. These particular evidences of spring we can get along without.”

***The Kansas City Call editorial
March 9, 1928***

ON STAGE AT THE APOLLO



Mildred Clark, Lillian Franklin-Bingley, Genetter Bradley, and Buelah Gummels

The Kansas City Melodyaires were one of the most famous gospel groups to come out of Kansas City, recording for ABC, Peacock and Song Bird Records.

been out there singing for the Lord and don’t even have a picket fence.”

After returning to Kansas City, Bradley ran a successful gospel workshop until the late 1980s. She still continues to sing.

Today she says the real value of gospel is not the commercial success that some contemporary groups chase. Instead, she says, it’s the “spiritual anointing that falls on you. That’s the highlight—telling the good news, and that’s what we were doing, and enjoyed it.”

Bob Maravich, a historian and founder of the Black Gospel Blog in Chicago, said the legacy of Kansas City’s pioneer gospel groups continues to inspire because “of their religious conviction.

“They got very little money and still they pursued their conviction. These are the ones that paved the way for today’s artists,” he said.