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Twentieth-Century Gospel

As the People Moved They Sang a New Song

I joined my first and only gospel choir when I joined the church at eleven years of age. It was the first gospel choir at Mt. Early Baptist, a small rural church in Dougherty County pastored by my father, Rev. Jessie Johnson. My sister Fannie, who played the piano, organized the choir. It was 1954 – gospel was everywhere. Most of the Baptist and Pentecostal churches inside the city of Albany, the county seat of Dougherty, already had gospel choirs. However, the country churches were sometimes a decade behind the city churches.

We loved gospel music, and the coming of our own gospel choir, our own choir standing in white gospel robes (which my mother made), was so exciting! We learned our songs off the radio, and sometimes Fannie would order sheet music from the Chicago-based gospel publishing companies. Every Sunday morning the local radio station, WGPC, was reserved for Black gospel music. This is where we heard the latest hits on the radio. Mahalia Jackson was one of my favorite singers; the Five Blind Boys of Jackson, Mississippi, were my favorite quartet. I loved the music of the Roberta Martin Singers from Chicago, Illinois, and the Davis Sisters from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. In addition to a gospel DJ playing the nationally renowned groups, Sunday morning was also the time when we heard local quartets, who

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presented fifteen-minute programs sponsored by funeral homes or a local store.

African American gospel music began as the exciting new congregational and composed sacred music in urban Pentecostal, Baptist, and some Methodist churches. The congregations of these churches were made up of people who had moved to the city from the rural South. By midcentury, gospel was completing a circle of sorts, as the old home country churches whose families had been impacted by migration to the north began to organize their gospel choirs.

With the formation of a gospel choir, Mt. Early was entering a gospel era that had by then been underway for most of the century. Having a choir that sang songs separated from the rest of the congregation, purchasing a piano, paying a musician, having a church building with a choir stand: these were big steps for small congregations that had been carrying on their worship services based on traditions formed in the nineteenth century. Making room for the new music and choir altered the worship services. In the rural churches and in rarer instances in urban churches, gospel was added to the worship services with the older style of singing being relegated to a brief opening in devotional services, prayer meetings, and baptisms.

During this same period, as I began to sing gospel, my Uncle Charlie Johnson, a great quartet bass singer, and my Aunt Dorothy and their children, my cousins, moved from across the road from where we lived in Dougherty County, right outside of Albany, Georgia, to Philadelphia. I still have strong memories of wanting our family to move with them, but my parents said no. So our family stayed in the South, as did most African Americans. My uncle and aunt moved to a strange city, but they moved with

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the support of members of my aunt's family members, who had moved to Philadelphia earlier. By this time Philadelphia had an old and large African American community whose twentieth-century expansion had been based on the Great Migration of the past four decades.

There were several levels to the African American community in Philadelphia. The free Black community dated back to before this country was formed as an independent nation. Sometimes, especially during the twentieth century, when we moved to the city, the older African American neighborhoods in these cities both welcomed and worried about being overrun by the large numbers of "country" Black folk arriving daily from the South. What to do with them? There was so much they did not know. We didn't talk right, we didn't dress right, our behavior was downhomey, country, and sometimes embarrassing. Too often our education was sparse or nonexistent. At best the old urban communities of Black people survived in a fragile economic, social, and political balance with the larger unsympathetic White community. What would they do with the millions of Black people pouring off the farms into the neighborhoods looking for room to grow in the decreasing spaces of the urban landscape? Sometimes the welcome was hesitant.

Leaving the land of the rural South to seek out expanded possibilities in urban centers that were more crowded than one could ever imagine, and receiving a sometimes chilly reception – from the city, from the weather, from those who looked as if they were your people – made for a harsh transition. The welcome could be as cold as the wind coming over Lake Michigan into Chicago, and you would find yourself wondering whether this was the worst decision you'd ever made.

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One of the founding fathers of the earliest form of composed gospel music, the gospel hymn, was a Methodist minister serving a congregation in Philadelphia as the stream of migrants from the South became a flood. Charles Albert Tindley was a minister who still remembered what it was like to have to leave. He had come to Philadelphia in 1875 when he was around eighteen years old, newly married, in search of a place big enough for his potential. He had come to family, an aunt, his deceased mother's sister. Tindley's father, who had been a slave in Berlin, Maryland, married a free Black woman. When she died, the baby, Charles Albert, was raised by her sister and until he was nine grew up in a free Black family. When Tindley was nine, his father, now remarried, took him back and farmed him out to work on plantations. Tindley taught himself to read and joined the Methodist church in Berlin. He moved to Philadelphia, found work as a hod carrier for brick masons, and worked as the sexton taking care of his church. At night he studied for the ministry, and against the odds and opinions of many misbelievers he passed the exams and became an ordained Methodist minister.[1]

In 1902, Tindley became pastor of the congregation he would lead for the next thirty years. He still remembered what it was like to need to leave and try to make a different life for yourself. He welcomed these Black people coming largely from Eastern Shore Maryland into his congregation, and he established his ministry as a foundation for helping them to move successfully into the city and into urban life. Through his church, newly arrived migrants were led to night classes, given leads for work, and urged to use the church saving plans, which allowed them to save up for a down payment on their row houses.

Charles Albert Tindley's ministry reflected his understanding

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that his congregation was expanding and had to serve people moving at different levels as they adjusted to city life. He was an innovative pastor and a gifted preacher whose sermons were legend. In looking at the moving that Blacks did during this time, Tindley's story is a good place to start. Within his church new practices were evolving for a new urban people, and it was reflected on every level of his ministry. A strong part of Tindley's preaching rested on his ability to tell a story with a lesson accessible to everyone in the congregation, no matter what their education. He was also a songwriter who created new sacred songs, several of which have become classics in the gospel-hymn canon.

I was drawn to Tindley, not because of his work with a migrant congregation, but because of his work as a songwriter of new sacred songs in the early years of the twentieth century. I was to discover that to study gospel one had to study the Great Migration. I found that I could not study Tindley's music without looking at his ministry in the church that was named for him after it was rebuilt in 1924.

Tindley wrote his new gospel hymns as a way of extending and amplifying his sermons. In 1901, we find him copyrighting his first songs. We don't know when he wrote them; we know this is when he grouped them together and sent them to the copyright office. His songs were already making their way through the Black church community. In 1916 he published a songbook called *Songs of Paradise*, and in 1932 he published a collection of his sermons called *Book of Sermons*. What you have in a man like Tindley, a self-educated man, is a person who actually sees himself in the path of history and participated in documenting his journey. Black people loved his songs: these were songs he had written as a part of his sermons and were heard first from his pulpit.[2]

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His most popular song, "Stand By Me," is the second most well-known hymn in Black Christendom, after "Precious Lord," the gospel hymn composed by Thomas Andrew Dorsey in 1932. It is an interesting song to look at because it shows how he spoke to his congregation. He used their way of talking to fashion his lyrics:

STAND BY ME

When the storms of life are raging, stand by me
When the storms of life are raging, stand by me
When the world is tossing me, like a ship upon the sea
Thou who rulest wind and water, stand by me.

In the midst of tribulation, stand by me
In the midst of tribulation, stand by me
When the host of hell assail, and my strength began to fail
Thou who never lost a battle, stand by me.

In the midst of faults and failures, stand by me
In the midst of faults and failures, stand by me
When I do the best I can, and my friends misunderstand
Thou who knowest all about me, stand by me.

In the midst of persecution, stand by me
In the midst of persecution, stand by me
When my foes in battle array, undertake to stop my way
Thou who saved Paul and Silas, stand by me.

When I'm growing old and feeble, stand by me
When I'm growing old and feeble, stand by me
When my life becomes a burden and I'm nearing chilly Jordan
Oh thou Lily of the Valley, stand by me.

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The poetry created out of the "talk" of the "regular" folks is full of motion, because of the way Tindley handles the presence and naming of God. The actual term God, Jehovah, does not appear in the lines. As a poet Tindley wove a circle using the experiences of his life and the lives of his members as if to say, "This is where I am or will be and I want company. Not just any company, but in the case of life being like 'a ship on a raging sea,' I want my company to be the One who rules the elements. When I am challenged and when I am persecuted and my enemies began to circle around me for the kill, I want standing with me the One who has never lost a battle, the One who was able to get Paul and Silas out of jail."

Tindley would also preach about getting old and feeble. He believed in miracles, as shown in his composition "Leave It There":

If your body suffers pain, and your health you can't regain,
And your soul is almost sinking in despair,
Jesus knows the pain you feel, He can cure and He can heal,
Take your burden to the Lord and leave it there.

But Tindley would also look out on his congregation and face them with the fact that they would get old and die. There would come a time when the body itself would be the burden in need of laying down to rise no more. The last stanza begins, "When I'm growing old and feeble, stand by me"; this is repeated twice, then the third line, "When my life becomes a burden, and I'm crossing chilly Jordan"; then Tindley goes to nature, "Oh thou Lily of the Valley, stand by me."

The other factor in selecting this song is that it gives us a graphic example of how the oral tradition interfaced with

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the Western notion of composed music. Tindley copyrighted his songs and had them set to Western musical notation. His songs were transmitted orally and through the printed score. Black people did not like all of Tindley's songs, but when they did – songs like "Stand by Me," "We'll Understand It Better By and By," "The Storm Is Passing Over," "Nothing Between," "Someday" (the song we generally call "Beams of Heaven," the funeral song), "What Are They Doing in Heaven Today?" and "Leave It There," to name a few – they were embraced and offered out again in every style and configuration one could imagine.

Most of the time when we sang these songs, we did not acknowledge Tindley as composer, because the songs came to us via the oral tradition without Tindley's name being connected with it. The singer of a Tindley composition often sang the song as a church song and sometimes seemed to think it was of her or his own creation. This may seem fraudulent with our Western sense of copyright; however, within the African-based tradition it is understandable. Within the Black tradition, one is not really considered a singer until one has found one's own way of presenting a work. In a way, "Stand By Me" performed by harmonica virtuoso Elder Roma Wilson, the Five Blind Boys of Alabama, the Caravans, and the Violinaires are all original compositions based on the Tindley composition. They are singing Tindley's song transformed by their own creative interpretation, and in most cases they do not credit Tindley. We can go further and say that when the rhythm-and-blues singer Ben E. King sang his version of "Stand By Me" as a love song, he owes Tindley, whose song gave us the central phrase "stand by me" and another way of asking for support and company.

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Charles Albert Tindley also copyrighted "I'll Overcome Someday" in his first group of songs in 1901. Although the text of the verses and the melody are different, the chorus is the same text that becomes the theme song of the Civil Rights Movement some six decades later. There are those who credit Tindley with creating the original song, but there is some evidence that a church song, "I'll Be Alright," was a part of Methodist and Baptist congregational repertoire by the turn of the century. This means that Tindley, himself a composer, operating within the African American oral tradition, may have drawn from his traditional core as much as he gave to it.[3]

The lessons from the gospel hymns of Charles Albert Tindley are reflected in almost any migration story you find. The historian Allan Ballard, who was born in Philadelphia, found in his autobiographical history of the migration of his family that his father's people moved to Philadelphia from South Carolina. Ballard found that African Americans moved sometimes in an effort to improve their economic conditions. He also found that racial violence, especially lynchings, drove many people to leave a place of racially based terror.

> People began to leave Abbeville County after the Phoenix riot. In 1898, while thousands of Italians, Jews, and Slavs were fleeing Europe for the United States, a local paper described another migration: "During the past week, three cars of Negroes have left Greenwood for lower Mississippi. These cars have carried away 45, 35, and 24 Negroes, respectively." But it still took several years before the community gathered itself together to go North. And it took several other developments – the arrival of the boll weevil that decimated

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> the cotton fields, forcing people to abandon farming, the war that created jobs in industry in the North, and the availability of cheap railroad tickets – before the journey out of this bloodsoaked land could really begin.[4]

In 1916, the same year Tindley published *Songs of Paradise*, Thomas Andrew Dorsey, the man who some sixteen years later would write "Precious Lord" and become known as the father of gospel music, was a young man moving to Chicago from Atlanta, Georgia. Dorsey, who actually coined the term "gospel" for the new sacred music, said that as he began to compose he tried to write like Charles Albert Tindley. According to Joe Williams, manager and lead singer with the Harmonizing Four Quartet of Richmond, Virginia, a group that began in 1928, so great was his association with the new music spreading through many urban congregations that occasionally new songs written in this style would be called "dorseys."[5]

Thomas Dorsey was himself among the millions who moved during this time, moving first with his family from Villa Rica, Georgia, to Atlanta in 1908, and then moving from Atlanta to Chicago in 1916. Dorsey grew up in a musical, religious Baptist family. He learned shape-note singing from his father, and the organ from his mother. Shape-note singing was a practice that moved south during the nineteenth century to train congregations to read music scores. These scores used a different shape for each note on the scale with the syllables *do re me fa sol la ti do*. In Atlanta, he received his only additional formal music training from a music teacher.[6]

Young Dorsey was also influenced by an uncle who played blues. Dorsey was a top blues pianist in Atlanta by the time he decided to

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