

## “How I Got Over”--Clara Ward and the Ward Singers (1950)

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Essay by Don Cusic (guest post)\*



*Clara Ward and the Ward Singers*



*Early label*

The United States was a segregated nation during the 1940s and 1950s; there was a black section of town and a white section, blacks were barred from using white-only services or going to “white only” places. The 1940s and 1950s were also the “Golden Age” of black gospel music. It was a time when artists such as Mahalia Jackson, the Dixie Hummingbirds, the Soul Stirrers, Sallie Martin, Roberta Martin, Thomas Dorsey, Sister Rosetta Tharp and the Clara Ward Singers performed before packed black churches where the singers “wrecked the house” as they performed with spirit-led emotional intensity.

Those years also laid the groundwork for the Civil Rights movement and legislation in the 1960s. The Civil Rights movement was driven by songs from the black churches that soothed, ignited and inspired African-Americans to “move on up a little higher” and told audiences how they “got over.” The spirit moved in mighty ways as the singers sang and the pews emptied as church-goers shouted their hallelujahs.

Clara Ward and the Clara Ward Singers were stars in the world of black gospel. Ward’s story began after World War I when George and Gertrude Ward moved from South Carolina to Philadelphia in hopes of a better future. They had two daughters, Willa and Clara (born April 21, 1924). In Philadelphia, they found a wealth of black gospel talent.

Clara’s mother, Gertrude Ward claimed that she received a message from God in 1931, telling her to “Go sing the Gospel and help save dying and lost men and women.” Gertrude was an entrepreneur and began booking gospel concerts in Philadelphia; among those she booked was Thomas Dorsey and Sallie Martin in 1934. Gertrude was also the textbook case of a stage mother. She formed the Consecrated Gospel Singers with her two daughters and began performing. At the National Baptist Convention in Chicago in 1943, the group sang four songs and received an overwhelming response, which led the Ward singers to become full-time professionals.

At East Trigg Avenue Baptist Church in Memphis, W. Herbert Brewster had been the preacher since 1930. Brewster, born July 2, 1897 in Somerville, Tennessee, was a graduate of Roger Williams College in Nashville and moved to Memphis during the 1920s. Like Thomas Dorsey, “The Father of Black Gospel” who was music director of the Pilgrim Baptist Church in Chicago from 1932, Brewster was a prolific songwriter and worked with singers in his church to sing his songs. Brewster heard a young teenager sing and felt she was the perfect singer to interpret his songs. She was singer T.C. Anderson. They worked well together; Brewster would begin teaching her a new song and, according to Brewster, Anderson “would take over and complete that which she had heard before.”

Brewster felt she had the beauty and stature of a “queen” so he named her after Queen Candice of Ethiopia; she became known as Queen C. Anderson, her original name lost and almost forgotten.

Anderson was a member of the Brewsteraires and was the first to sing a number of Brewster’s songs, including “Move On Up a Little Higher,” which was made famous by Mahalia Jackson. “Surely God is Able” and “How I Got Over” were made famous by Clara Ward. “Move On Up a Little Higher” and “Surely God is Able” both reportedly sold over a million copies; Ward first heard Brewster’s song, “How I Got Over,” on a record by Queen C. Anderson:

*How I got over  
How I got over  
My soul looks back and wonders how I got over  
...I’m gonna thank Jesus for all he’s done for me*

Gertrude Ward was a controlling mother and dominated Clara Ward, pushing her to perform both inside and outside of churches. During her career, Clara Ward performed at Carnegie Hall, in Las Vegas and Disneyland, appeared on TV shows hosted by Dinah Shore, Ed Sullivan, Mike Douglas, “The Today Show” and “The Tonight Show,” was in the film “A Time to Sing” and appeared on Broadway in the production of Langston Hughes’s “Tambourine for Glory.”

The Clara Ward Singers were known for changing the “look” of gospel. They discarded choir robes and dressed in beautiful, elegant gowns with towering wigs. They travelled in long limousines hauling their extensive wardrobes in a trailer. Clara became as well known for her stylish clothes as for her singing.

“How I Got Over” was known as a “house wrecker,” which meant the up-tempo song made an emotional, spirit-filled connection with congregations.

*Well I’m gonna sing hallelujah  
Well you known I’m gonna shout  
Thank Him for all He’s done for me*

In 1953, Clara Ward founded a publishing company and published William Brewster’s songs as well as her own songs. She was listed as writer of “How I Got Over” on the first copyright but that was later changed and Brewster is listed as songwriter of the song.

Clara was driven to exhaustion by her domineering mother, who discouraged any romantic interests. In 1972, she suffered a stroke but made a “miracle” recovery and continued to perform. However, a second stroke led to her death on January 16, 1973 at the age of 48.

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\* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.