“Lord Keep Me Day By Day” -- The Caravans (1958)

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Essay by Robert M. Marovich (guest post)*

“Lord Keep Me Day By Day,” first recorded in 1958 by the Caravans, has become one of the best-known hymns in the African American gospel music canon.

The Caravans formed in the late 1940s as background singers for Robert Anderson after he left the Roberta Martin Singers to pursue a solo career. Initially known as Robert Anderson’s Good Shepherd Singers, the Caravans hailed from Chicago and Northwest Indiana, and included Elyse Yancey, Irma Gwynn, Nellie Grace Daniels, Ora Lee Hopkins, and Betty Jones. From 1949 to 1952, the ladies backed Anderson on recordings for the Chicago-based independent labels Miracle, Premium, and United. When Gwynn left to raise a family, Anderson replaced her with Albertina Walker and changed the group’s name to the Gospel Caravan.

Under circumstances that remain unclear, the Gospel Caravan parted ways with Anderson during an April 1952 recording session for Leonard Allen and Lew Simpkins’ United Records. With studio time left on the clock, the ladies—rechristened as the Caravans—cut two sides on their own. Allen and Simpkins released the single on United’s sister label, States. With tight harmonies and a demonstrative delivery honed from years of church singing, the Caravans amassed a fan base that soon surpassed Anderson’s. With Walker as manager and James Cleveland as accompanist, the Caravans traveled nationally as part of multi-group package tours. Their States singles, 14 in total between 1952 and 1956, were radio favorites.

States Records folded in 1958, leaving the Caravans without a record contract, though not for long. In October of that year, Savoy Records not only signed the troupe, beating out rival Peacock Records, but also purchased the group’s master tapes from United/States. At the time of the signing, the Caravans consisted of Walker, Delores Washington, Inez Andrews, Shirley Caesar, and Eddie Williams, who took the accompanist job after Cleveland moved to Detroit to direct the Reverend C.L. Franklin’s New Bethel Baptist Church Choir.
Born around 1937 and raised in Robbins, Illinois, singer, songwriter, and accompanist Eddie Williams joined Walker, Andrews, and Caesar in a New York studio on Tuesday, December 30, 1958, to cut eight sides for Savoy’s newly-formed Gospel imprint. Two of the selections were “Lord Keep Me Day By Day” and “Mary Don’t You Weep.” The Andrews-led “Mary Don’t You Weep” was the first single released from the session, and it hit radio and retailers in early 1959.

“Lord Keep Me Day By Day,” the fourth Caravans single on Gospel, followed in spring of that year. Written by Williams, who also played piano on and contributed lead vocals to the recording, “Lord Keep Me Day by Day” was neither the first nor the last time a male accompanist for the Caravans wrote and led a song. Nevertheless, composer credits were initially attributed to Albertina Walker (the error has since been rectified). The single received a four-star review in the June 8, 1959, issue of “Billboard,” indicating strong sales potential. The “Cash Box” reviewer, on the other hand, preferred the flip side, “Your Friend,” because it featured the more prominent Andrews as lead vocalist.

Nevertheless, “Lord Keep Me Day By Day” tugged at the heartstrings of radio listeners, who heard in it more than a prayer for divine guidance on achieving everlasting life after death. Like folk spirituals, gospel songs communicate on multiple levels of meaning. For example, one line from the song, “I'm just a stranger here/Traveling through this barren land,” was an implicit social commentary on the times. Williams’ emotional plea spoke to the circumstances of African Americans in 1958--living in segregated housing, attending segregated schools, drinking from segregated water fountains, relegated to low-paying jobs, and enduring other instances of degradation and discrimination.

The producer of “Lord Keep Me Day By Day” was Ozzie Cadena, an Oklahoma City native who fell in love with African American religious music after his family moved to Newark. Between 1954 and 1959, Cadena provided in-house production for Savoy’s gospel and jazz catalogues. Besides working with the Caravans and other gospel artists, Cadena also produced albums by such jazz notables as Cannonball Adderley, Lee Morgan, Art Pepper, and Charlie Parker.

“Lord Keep Me Day By Day,” along with 11 other sides from the Caravans’ 1958 Savoy sessions, was included on “Mary Don’t You Weep,” the group’s first LP of all-new material. Rudy Van Gelder, one of the most important recording engineers of the 1950s and 1960s, mastered the album at his Hackensack, New Jersey, studio. In other words, the same person who engineered Coltrane’s December 1964 tribute to God, “A Love Supreme,” mastered another tribute to God, “Lord Keep Me Day By Day,” six years earlier.

By this time, the Caravans were one of gospel’s super-groups, and they would remain so throughout the 1960s. Besides Walker, Washington, Andrews, Caesar, and Williams, other all-star personnel over time included Dorothy Norwood, Cassietta George, Bessie Griffin, James Herndon, Willie James McPhatter (cousin of Drifters lead vocalist Clyde McPhatter), and dance music diva Loleatta Holloway.
Sometime around 1961 or 1962, Williams left the Caravans to focus on his own gospel group, the Crusaders, which he formed as early as 1960 and included Clara Walker, Christine Clark, and the daughters of folk legend Josh White. As Evangelist Eddie Williams, he recorded an album for Savoy in 1971. He died in November 2015.

Published in 1959 by Martin and Morris Music Studio, once the nation’s most successful African-American-owned publishing enterprise, “Lord Keep Me Day By Day” is now a gospel evergreen. It is number 129 in the “African American Heritage Hymnal,” an interdenominational collection of hymns, songs, and spirituals sung by the African American Christian church community. It has been recorded at least two dozen times by groups such as the Drinkard Ensemble, the Isaac Douglas Singers, the James Herndon Singers, the Florida Mass Choir, Willie Neal Johnson and the Gospel Keynotes, and the Kurt Carr Singers. Former Caravans colleagues Albertina Walker and James Cleveland reprised “Lord Keep Me Day By Day” on Walker’s 1979 album, “Please Be Patient with Me.” She led a gathering of gospel legends in a hearty rendition of the song during a 1994 “Gospel Pioneer Reunion” program produced by the Gaither Music Group.


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