

# “Move On Up a Little Higher”--Mahalia Jackson (1947)

Added to the National Registry: 2005

Essay by Robert F. Darden (guest post)\*



*Mahalia Jackson*



*Original label*



*Rev. Herbert Brewster*

Even today, Mahalia Jackson stands atop of the pantheon of gospel singers, with a presence so commanding that her fellow artists called her the “Queen of Gospel Music.” She was a household name and presence in the United States at a time when racial prejudice kept virtually every other African American off television and out of the greatest concert venues in the country. And yet, her greatest song, the one that paved the way for her commercial success and broke down numerous barriers between races, was recorded with a sense of desperation to save a recording career at a last-ditch recording session.

Jackson, born in extreme poverty in New Orleans, followed a host of African Americans up the Illinois Central Railroad and Highway 61 to Chicago seeking employment and to escape the Jim Crow South. Very quickly, her prodigious vocal talents attracted the attention of the self-proclaimed “Father of Gospel Music” Thomas Dorsey. Dorsey, the author of “Take My Hand, Precious Lord” and “Peace in the Valley,” had teamed with Sallie Martin, a rough-hewn gospel singer and shrewd businesswoman. In the 1920s and ‘30s, the three promoted Dorsey’s gospel songs, first throughout Chicago, then across the country. Jackson’s singing and Dorsey’s music became a sensation at black Baptist conventions and launched her career. But an early recording session for Decca Records in 1937 produced few sales and she did not record again for nearly a decade.

Still, Jackson’s powerful, expressive voice, commanding presence and esteem in the African American religious community eventually brought her to the attention of promoter Johnny Meyer. In 1946, Meyer introduced her to Bess and Ike Berman, founders of the independent New York City label, Apollo Records, whose roster included the Georgia Peach and the Dixie Hummingbirds. Jackson recorded four songs for the Bermans, none of which sold well, save for in the Chicago market, where disk jockey Studs Terkel, an early friend and supporter, promoted her work. The Bermans were ready to end the relationship in late 1947 when producer Art Freeman convinced them to let Jackson record a song he had heard her warm up with, the Rev. Herbert Brewster’s “Move on Up a Little Higher.” Jackson’s “head arrangement” featured a

distinctive New Orleans-styled beat and a surging organ and piano accompaniment. Within months, “Move on Up, Part I and II” was well on its way to becoming one of the best-selling, most enduring gospel songs of all time, raking up sales of two million copies in its initial release. Re-releases of the recording continue to sell.

Musically, there is no denying the song’s propulsive power. Fueled by Jackson’s mastery of the old style “surge singing,” a combination of improvised moans, trills, whoops, glissandos and rhythmic risk-taking, “Move on Up,” especially Part II’s all-improvised “vamp,” is still thrilling and unpredictable. Jackson’s best pianist, Mildred Falls, and organist Ralph Jones, stay with Jackson throughout, providing a swelling foundation for the vocals.

But it is the message in Brewster’s lyrics that caused many African Americans, particularly in the 1950s and ‘60s, to adopt “Move on Up a Little Higher” as something of a national anthem, second only to “Take My Hand, Precious Lord.” Brewster, the pastor of East Trigg Baptist Church in Memphis, was an accomplished and highly literate composer, whose lyrics reflected his wide education in both the theological and political realms. In addition to his powerful sermons, Brewster composed elaborate gospel dramas or pageants, many of which had civil rights-related messages. Among the regular attendees to East Trigg Baptist was a young Elvis Presley.

“Move on Up” was, according to gospel historian Anthony Heilbut, “a barely disguised freedom song” and its message of empowerment and achievement in the face of violence and segregation was clearly understood by African American listeners. Brewster’s often public fight for civil rights in Memphis in the 1950s preceded the movement that followed. But his compositions “How I Got Over,” “Surely God is Able,” “I’m Climbing Higher and Higher” and “Move on Up a Little Higher” reached far beyond the Memphis city limits. “In order to get my message over,” Brewster once said, “there were things that were almost dangerous to say, but you could sing it.”

Jackson was also active in the Civil Rights movement, actively campaigning for and financially supporting a number of candidates, beginning with Franklin D. Roosevelt (“Roosevelt fed me when I was *hongry*. A-men.”) and including, among others, presidents Harry S. Truman, John F. Kennedy, and Lyndon B. Johnson. She sang at the inauguration balls and ceremonies for both Kennedy and Johnson. In addition to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech, one of the signature moments of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in August 1963 was Jackson’s performance of “I Been Boked and I Been Scorned.”

Jackson eventually left the struggling Apollo label, signed with the William Morris Agency, and recorded for Columbia Records. With Columbia, her recordings became more geared for the white marketplace and few of her performances contained the scintillating fire of “Move on Up,” “City Called Heaven,” “The Upper Room” or “Walking to Jerusalem.” Jackson became a staple on national television, toured internationally, and received a host of national honors, but “Move on Up a Little Higher” remained her “theme” song through her career, whether singing in Carnegie Hall or at an African American church on Chicago’s South Side. Jackson was nationally mourned when she died in January 27, 1972.

While a number of artists have recorded “Move on Up,” including Brother John Sellers (who recorded the original version in 1946), Albertina Walker, Marion Williams, and the Grace Gospel Singers, yet more than half a century after she first recorded it, “Move on Up a Little Higher” remains firmly identified with Mahalia Jackson.

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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.