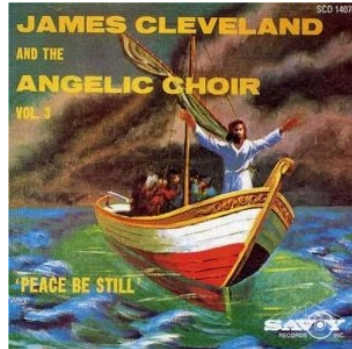


## “Peace Be Still”—James Cleveland (1963)

Added to the National Registry: 2004

Essay by Robert Marovich (guest post)\*



*Original album*



*James Cleveland*

In 1962, Savoy Records artist James Cleveland, a rising star in the religious music field, wanted to record with a church choir. His reputation as an effective choir director was firmly established in 1959 when he led Detroit’s Voices of Tabernacle to acclaim on its debut album, “The Love of God,” for HOB Records. Savoy executives were eager for Cleveland to replicate his Voices of Tabernacle success for their label. Since the Voices were under contract to HOB, Cleveland had to find another choir to work with him.

On a recommendation from Savoy producer Fred Mendelsohn, Cleveland asked the Reverend Lawrence Roberts, supervisor of gospel recordings for Savoy, about borrowing his Angelic Choir. Organized by Roberts as a community group called the Voices of Faith, the Angelic Choir was now established as the church choir at Nutley, New Jersey’s First Baptist Church, where Roberts was pastor. Since the choristers had limited experience in a recording studio, Roberts believed their true essence would shine through if Cleveland recorded with them in the church, before a congregation of familiar faces. Though unconvinced a live recording was the most efficient way to make a record, Cleveland consented and Savoy greenlighted the project.

Recorded in 1962 at First Baptist, literally a “little wooden church on a hill,” Cleveland and the Angelic Choir’s first two live Sunday Service albums, “This Sunday in Person” and “How Great Thou Art,” were as commercially and critically successful as “The Love of God.” First Baptist invested its portion of record sales into a building campaign. The wooden church was razed and ground broken on a modern structure.

The success of the first two volumes encouraged Savoy to keep the Cleveland and Angelic Choir gravy train chugging forward. The third volume, “Peace Be Still,” was recorded on the evening of September 19, 1963. Since First Baptist was under construction, the session took place at Trinity Temple Seventh Day Adventist Church in Newark, New Jersey, where the First Baptist congregation held services during construction. Trinity Temple was packed with well-wishers who listened to Cleveland and Roberts direct the Angelic Choir while John Hason accompanied on piano and Solomon Herriott on organ. Session drummer Joe Marshall kept the beat.

“Peace Be Still,” the second song committed to tape that evening, was a hymnbook standard. The melody came from “Master, the Tempest is Raging,” composed in 1874 by Dr. Horatio Palmer, and its lyrics from a song text written by Mary Ann Baker, a Baptist and temperance movement supporter. The lyrics were inspired by a story, chronicled in Mark 4:39, about Jesus and his disciples on a boat during a dangerous storm: “And [Jesus] arose, and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, ‘Peace, be still.’ And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm.” Cleveland borrowed liberally from an arrangement written by Gwendolyn Cooper Lightner for Bethany Baptist Church in Los Angeles and the Voices of Hope, a community choir she co-founded.

Hason’s solemn piano melody and Marshall’s crashing cymbal work, which evoked distant thunder and rising waves, set the menacing mood. Assuming the role of one of Jesus’s disciples, Cleveland beseeched the Lord in his hoarse baritone. “Master, the tempest is raging,” he cried, provoking instantaneous shouts from members of the choir and congregation. Notwithstanding this stirring introduction, the song’s true selling point occurred during the story’s lyrical and musical apogee. After building gradually to a thunderous crescendo, Cleveland and the choir dramatized Jesus’s calming the storm with a sudden plunge to diminuendo. They then repeated this technique to the delight of the congregants. It was spectacular gospel music theater.

Just as folk spirituals carried hidden messages, so too did “Peace Be Still,” as articulated by Cleveland and the Angelic Choir. After all, this was 1963, a year that witnessed the historic March on Washington but also the turning of high-pressure fire hoses on youth protestors in Birmingham, Alabama. Indeed, just four days before the “Peace Be Still” session, segregationists bombed Birmingham’s Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, killing four young girls and injuring many others. It was as if Cleveland and the Angelic Choir were calling on God to calm the raging waters of American injustice and brutality.

Reminiscing about the recording session a half-century later, members of the Angelic Choir did not recall the Birmingham church bombing being a subject of conversation that September evening. Perhaps racially-motivated violence had become so commonplace that the choristers were all but immune to its impact. Or perhaps it spoke to the unflinching resilience of African Americans that would be on display two years later, in Selma, Alabama. Supporting this latter theory, one participant in the “Peace Be Still” recording session remarked: “We weren’t so disturbed that we couldn’t serve the Lord. We knew the Lord and we were there to praise and lift up His name. That was the purpose. So anything that happened anywhere else, we were just there to praise the Lord and thank Him that we were able to make it.”

In addition to the title track, “Peace Be Still” introduced two other songs to the gospel canon. Led on the album by 11 year-old vocalist Geraldine Griffin, “I Had a Talk With God” was secularized in 1964 into a soul hit, “I Had a Talk With My Man Last Night,” by Mitty Collier. “Jesus Saves” has since become a repertory favorite of gospel soloists, groups, and choirs.

Released in late 1963 by Savoy Records, “Peace Be Still” and the two-sided single of the title track dominated “Billboard’s” Spiritual charts well into 1965, ultimately sharing the Top Five spot with the fourth Cleveland and Angelic Choir volume, the Grammy-nominated “I Stood on

the Banks of Jordan.” During the mid-1960s, few gospel artists could compete with James Cleveland and the Angelic Choir when it came to chart-topping records.

In March 1966, Fred Mendelsohn reported that Savoy had sold more than 300,000 copies of “Peace Be Still”--at a time when sales of 50,000 copies of a gospel album was cause for celebration. Two years later, Mendelsohn told “Ebony” magazine that “Peace Be Still” remained Savoy’s biggest-selling gospel album. It went on to sell between 600,000 and 800,000 units and helped usher in the now commonplace practice of recording gospel choirs live and in church. It was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame in 1999.

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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.