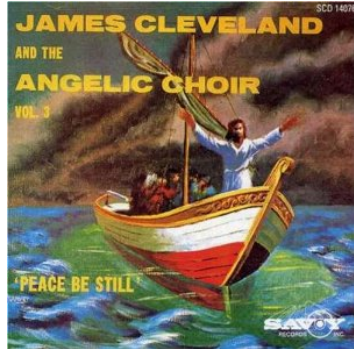


“Peace Be Still”—James Cleveland (1962)

Added to the National Registry: 2004

Essay by Robert Marovich (guest post)*



Original album



James Cleveland

In 1962, Rev. Lawrence Roberts, supervisor of gospel recordings for Savoy Records and newly-appointed pastor of First Baptist Church of Nutley, New Jersey, wanted to release a second album by his church choir. Formerly known as the Voices of Faith, the Angelic Choir of First Baptist Church recorded its debut album in a studio. Given that the singers were not professionals—just congregants who enjoyed singing—Roberts believed the Angelic Choir would be captured better if it was recorded in its element—in church, in front of an appreciative congregation.

It took some effort, but Roberts persuaded James Cleveland, one of Savoy’s newest gospel singing stars, to preside over the live recording session. Although Cleveland had been directing gospel groups and choirs since the early 1950’s, his reputation as a director was firmly established in 1959 when he led Detroit’s Voices of Tabernacle to critical and commercial acclaim on its debut album, “The Love of God” (HOB Records).

Overseen by Cleveland, the Angelic Choir’s first two live “Sunday Service” albums for Savoy, “This Sunday In Person” and “How Great Thou Art,” featured Los Angeles-based choir director Thurston Frazier and Billy Preston, the organ prodigy and future pop hit maker. The discs sold so well that First Baptist Church had the money to raze its church facility and build a new, modern structure on the same site. The albums also encouraged Savoy to continue riding the Cleveland and Angelic Choir gravy train.

Roberts and the Angelic Choir planned to record “Peace Be Still,” the third volume in the Sunday Service series, on Thursday evening, September 19, 1963. Since First Baptist was still under construction, Roberts secured Trinity Temple Seventh Day Adventist Church on Hillside Avenue in Newark for the session. The alternate facility was large enough to accommodate the choir and the throngs of congregants expected to attend the live recording.

Trinity Temple was packed that Thursday evening. Choir members took their places. Roberts directed while Cleveland sat at the piano. “Peace Be Still,” written in 1874 by Mary Ann Baker as “Peace Be Still!” and sometimes known as “Master the Tempest is Raging,” from its first line, was the opening selection, arranged for gospel choir by prolific songwriter, publisher, and group

leader Roberta Martin. The lyrics were based on Mark 4:39: “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.”

The rococo flair of Cleveland’s piano introduction to Martin’s arrangement evoked her influence on his keyboard style. Cleveland then assumed the character of one of Jesus’s disciples, invoking the Lord in song as cymbals evoked crashing waves. “Master, the tempest is raging,” Cleveland cried out in his coarse baritone. The emotional intensity of the opening line stimulated spontaneous responses of encouragement from members of the Angelic Choir.

The lyrics of spirituals carried hidden messages, and arguably so did “Peace Be Still,” as performed by Cleveland and the Angelics. After all, it was 1963, a year that witnessed the 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 leading a church rally in Newark to protest the Birmingham bombing, and the year’s other injustices, beseeching 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, especially to those who grew up in the Jim Crow South, that the choristers were all but immune to its impact. “We weren’t so disturbed that we couldn’t serve the Lord,” an original member said. “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: “Jesus Saves” and “I Had a Talk With God Last Night.” Led on the album by eleven-year-old vocalist Geraldine Griffin, “I Had a Talk” was secularized into the soul hit, “I Had a Talk With My Man Last Night,” by Mitty Collier.

“Peace Be Still” ends, fittingly, with the doxology, “Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow,” sung with quiescence as if the tempest that raged during “Peace Be Still” had calmed.

Gospel promoter George Hudson remembered the excitement in the air the day he visited Roberts at his home and encountered the pastor and several members of the Angelic Choir previewing “Peace Be Still.” He wrote: “That was my introduction to what was to become the greatest team in gospel record history.”

Released in late 1963 by Savoy Records, “Peace Be Still,” both the album and two-sided single of the title track, dominated “Billboard’s” Best Spiritual Releases. The single and album remained at the top of the spiritual charts well into 1965, eventually sharing the Top Five spot with the next Cleveland and Angelic Choir partnership, which featured the equally impressive “I Stood on the Banks of Jordan.” During the mid-1960s, it seemed as if only the Staple Singers, Caravans, and Consolers could compete successfully with James Cleveland and the Angelic

Choir when it came to chart-topping records. The Savoy releases turned the everyday people of the Angelic Choir into a nationally-popular ensemble and the first gospel choir to perform at New York's famed Apollo Theater.

In March 1966, Fred Mendelsohn of Savoy reported that the company had sold more than 300,000 copies of "Peace Be Still." Two years later, he told "Ebony" magazine that it remained Savoy's biggest-selling gospel album. It allegedly went on to sell more than 800,000 units and helped usher in the now commonplace practice of recording gospel choirs live and in church.

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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.