

“Precious Lord: New Recordings of the Great Gospel Songs of Thomas A. Dorsey”--Thomas Dorsey, Marion Williams, and others (1973)

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Essay by Anthony Heilbut (guest post)*



Thomas A. Dorsey

John Hammond was famous for saying that gospel singing was his favorite form of music, and that Mahalia Jackson, Marion Williams, Alex Bradford and the Dixie Hummingbirds occupied the same pantheon as Bessie Smith or Billie Holiday. With that knowledge I first approached him in 1963. At the time I was a 22-year-old doctoral candidate at Harvard University. As a Yale dropout that didn't impress John. But he was intrigued upon learning that I had been following gospel singers for eight years, starting with my first trips to the Apollo Theater, when I was 14. And that I had attended the first New York concerts of Aretha Franklin (whose first pop records he had produced) and the Staple Singers. And that I was responsible for getting Marion Williams and Alex Bradford into "Black Nativity," the first gospel musical to become an international phenomenon.

Even more, John and I shared a political commitment. With that knowledge, I proposed an album of Civil Rights songs, adapted to the unique styles of that era's gospel. It would have been called "Marching As to War." John found the title a mite too radical, but he endorsed the project, which might have been realized had he not been felled by a stroke. So it would be almost ten years before I would actually sit in a producer's chair. The occasion was my first book, "The Gospel Sound: Good News and Bad Times." John whispered in my ears that it was the "greatest music book in 50 years," but that he could never say that in public, and thereby ruin things with America's most powerful critics. Instead, he allowed me to produce not one but two anthologies of gospel music, "The Gospel Sound" and "The Gospel Sound, Volume II," and included both of them in his John Hammond Collection, thereby granting this tyro a legend's imprimatur.

The albums stirred up interest in surprising quarters. The best reviews came from rock and jazz critics; and many secular listeners were introduced to the power of black religious singing. For example, Ann Druyan, Carl Sagan's wife, discovered Blind Willie Johnson's "Dark was the Night" on Volume II (thanks to the Columbia connection, I was able to reissue a very clear-sounding version of this immortal track), and then they chose to spin it on a rocket ship in space.

I next proposed to John, an all-new album of the classic songs of Thomas A. Dorsey, the most famous of gospel composers, and to feature on the album some of the classic singers I had profiled in my book, among them: Marion Williams, Alex Bradford, and the Dixie Hummingbirds. He gave me the go-ahead.

The very first session would turn out to be auspicious. I had recently recommended the Dixie Hummingbirds to Paul Simon, who was looking for a strong quartet to back his version of "Loves Me Like a Rock." One Wednesday afternoon the Birds recorded that song; and in the evening returned to the studio to work with me. Simon even attended the evening session.

There followed several sessions with other singers, and then there was the sonic adventure of mixing. I learned as much from my engineer, Don Meehan, as from working with the singers, all of them artists I still revere. Here are a few piquant episodes:

--The most famous track would be the title song, which Professor Dorsey recalls on record the composing of it, occurring shortly after the deaths of his wife and first child. After he finishes, Marion Williams performs a chilling version that also exhibits an empathetic restraint--famous for hollering, she prefers to be modest. Many listeners remarked on their audible intimacy. In truth they were not even in the same place. I recorded her first, and told Dorsey's story to the great musicians- Lloyd Gary and Paul Griffin (Marion herself knew it well; Dorsey had been telling it for years). So they gave me a very soulful instrumental. A few weeks later, in Chicago, Professor Dorsey overdubbed his narrative, and with a gospel preacher's sense of time; he ends his tale as she begins her song.

--Marion Williams, Alex Bradford, and Bessie Griffin (a New Orleans native, like Mahalia Jackson, and often depicted as her most powerful challenger) were all gospel singers. But back then, gospel was divided into two formats, gospel and quartet. Two of my favorite quartet leads were Ira Tucker of the Dixie Hummingbirds, and R. H. Harris, former lead of the Soul Stirrers.

How I anticipated working with my quartet heroes! But, here again, there would be some sonic "trickeration" (Ira Tucker's word). I discovered that two of the Dixie Hummingbirds were pitchy in the extreme. So Don and I conceived a new blend, Ira Tucker and the second lead, James Walker, would be emphasized, while the background would consist mostly of the basso William Bobo and the guitarist Howard Carroll. (Howard also played behind Marion Williams; the first time he had accompanied a non-Hummingbird in almost 20 years. Tucker graciously attended her session, so Howard would not feel rudderless.) In so doing I felt most awkward--who was I to challenge the hallowed quartet format? But some years later Tucker revealed that he had followed my example. In subsequent releases with the Hummingbirds, he simply dropped the two senior members from the mix. If they heard the difference, he said, they didn't complain.

--Perhaps the most emotionally fraught recording session involved Professor Dorsey and Sallie Martin, the first vocalist to perform many of his classics. Miss Martin was famously fractious, never satisfied with any person or circumstance. "Why did you have to get me Mr. Dorsey?" she whispered at the session. "You know his fingers done got old." (At the time, he was 74; she was 77.) All the same, his playing is classic, and her vocal, typically direct and confident.

Their reunion, after 33 years, is one of the album's great joys. But there are so many others: I never tire of Alex Bradford's blood-curdling "If You See My Savior," or the soulful miracle of Marion Williams' "The Lord Will Make a Way Somehow," the whole piece sung willfully, wonderfully behind the beat. Or my pleasure in recording R.H. Harris singing "Thy Servant's Prayer Amen" with a background arrangement I had derived from a Soul Stirrers classic, "The Lord is My Shepherd." Harris' youthful quartet didn't know what I was attempting, but their great leader kept encouraging them, while winking at one bedazzled producer.

Anthony Heilbut received his Ph. D. from Harvard in 1966. Among his books are “The Gospel Sound: Good News and Bad Times” (various editions and in print since 1971); “The Fan Who Knew Too Much” (winner of the ASCAP Deems Taylor Award); and the forthcoming “When Gospel was Gospel: The Rise and Fall of a Great Tradition.” Albums he has produced have won the Grand Prix du Disque and the Grammy Award.

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