

Poets who know no better rhapsodise about the peace of nature. But a well-populated marsh is a cacophony.

- Bern Keating

A short history of Soul...



Mahalia Jackson & The Duke

“Ladies and gentlemen. It is Sunday, and it is time for the world’s greatest gospel singer - Miss Mahalia Jackson.”

When Willis Conover introduced Mahalia on the last night of the Newport Jazz Festival in 1958, it was midnight and raining heavily. She was reluctant to appear on a bill devoted to blues, but she agreed with a proposal that she come on to “welcome Sunday morning.” The audience loved her, and in a four day festival that featured Thelonius Monk, Miles Davis, Chuck Berry, Dinah Washington, Gerry Mulligan, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Anita O’Day, George Shearing, Sonny Stitt and other notable musicians, her performance is perhaps the most remembered.

Mahalia Jackson Live at Newport 1958 was the first LP I ever purchased, and is still one of my all time favourites.

Gospel music is a big part of the music scene in Africa. Many of you will have attended concerts given by the Soweto Gospel Choir in Newcastle. My program notes say “The pattern of traditional music in Southern Africa... covers all aspects of life, from coming of age to weddings, lullabies to war songs, and songs of praise to great leaders and heroes. Traditionally a single voice may call out,

and the community... responds. There is movement, ululation, clapping and stamping as [the music] progresses.” This is music that demands a response.

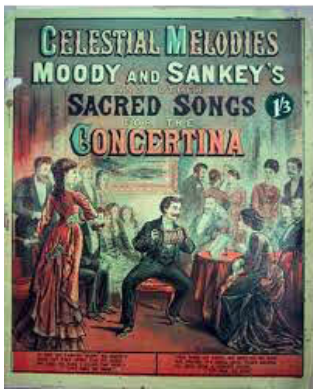
When I was in Tanzania a few years ago, I attended mass in the local Catholic church, having been told that there might be some music going on that could be to my liking. For a while I was a bit disappointed, as the choir sang very conservatively, just as one might hear in any church in Australia. Then something happened – the choir took off. The conductor was suddenly aroused, the choir swayed and the women ululated, the congregation responded. The altar boy swung his censer so violently that it hit on the pulpit. Sparks and ashes flew, and people were on their knees sweeping up the hot coals, while the music just went on. It was genuinely exciting, and certainly there was “movement, ululation, clapping and stamping.”

In the 1600s African slaves brought their traditional rhythms and melodies to America, where they were linked to tales of Old Testament heroes.

Because they were forbidden to sing openly about their own desire to be free, they could rejoice in the story of Exodus, when the children of Israel yearned to be liberated from bondage. When slaves sang “Go down Moses, way down in Egypt land/ Tell old Pharaoh to let my people go”, there was a deep and personal meaning. On the surface *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* may be about life in the hereafter, but any slave knew it was about the promise of life in the here and now, devoid of slavery. “Home” wasn’t heaven, it was freedom.

In 1835 Ethan Andrews attended a church service in Baltimore, and wrote: “There is, in some of the African voices, a wild and touching pathos, which art can never reach”. The spirit existed long before anyone started calling it “gospel.”

The first mention of ‘gospel’ was probably during the late 1800s, when Dwight L. Moody and Ira



Sankey, two evangelists, claimed that they “had reduced the population of Hell by a million souls” - largely by the use of music. Music “unfortunately of the lowest class”, according to some.

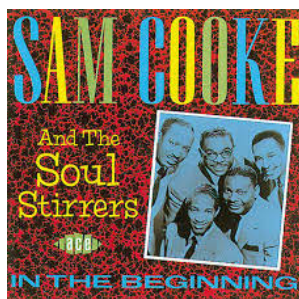
“Georgia Tom” Dorsey is credited with being

“the Father of Gospel”. Dorsey melded the language and concerns of the common churchgoers to sophisticated variations of the blues – the “Dorsey bounce”. He was the son of a Georgia preacher, and spent most of the 1920’s alternating between writing saucy double entendre numbers like “Tight Like That,” which paid the bills, and composing sacred tunes. Following a nervous breakdown in 1928, he realised that his musical double life was weighing heavily on his psyche, so he gave up the blues and devoted himself fulltime to spiritual music.

Kenneth Morris arrived in Chicago with his jazz band to play the 1931 World’s Fair, and never left. He is credited with popularizing the organ in gospel music. His arrangement of *Just a Closer Walk With Thee* is the definitive version. He joined Dorsey to establish the first publishing house for black gospel compositions in 1932. The same year, in a bid to push sales of his sheet music, Dorsey hired an up-and-coming singer named Mahalia Jackson. But even he was resistant to change and when Mahalia’s voice took off on flights of improvisation, moaning and slurring and bending notes, Dorsey wondered aloud if she could tone it down. She couldn’t - or wouldn’t.

Gospel quartets became popular in the late 30s. The Soul Stirrers from Texas was such a group. In fact they were probably the first five member quartet. They had two lead singers so that their

four part harmonies would not be disturbed when a singer stepped out in front. Often the two lead singers would switch leads, increasing the frenzy with each turn, “until members of the audience would ‘fall out’ in an emotional heap”.



As historian Michael Corcoran writes: “Gospel has always been a sensual music, with singers quivering to get every last drop of passion and the congregation wailing in unbridled ecstasy when they feel the spirit. Gospel is music that gets all over you.”

He describes the scene: “Before 19-year-old Mississippi-born and Chicago-raised Sam Cooke joined the Soul Stirrers in January 1951, older churchgoers sat in the front and youngsters filled the back pews. But as soon as Cooke’s first single with the group, *Jesus Gave Me Water* became a smash hit, seating preferences were flipped.

“Handsome, charming, sophisticated and possessing an impossibly smooth and athletic tenor, Cooke was gospel’s first official sex symbol.”

Most of the soul music performers of the 60s and 70s were former members of choirs. Aretha Franklin, Wilson Pickett, Otis Redding, Roberta Flack, James Brown, and many more, all performed in front of congregations, dressed in robes, learning the musical skills that led to their successful careers.

Jazz historian Bill Haesler writes of the influence of gospel music in Australia, beginning in the mid-1940s. “We young Melbournites discovered Bunk Johnson, George Lewis and the New Orleans Revival, and with it the 1940s gospel records they made accompanying church singers Sister Lottie Peavey and Sister Ernestine Washington.

“At this time we also discovered the black gospel music of Sister Rosetta Tharpe recorded in New York in the late 1930s using black jazz musicians in the backing group. Later we heard and enthusiastically embraced the singing of the great Mahalia Jackson. Here was a direct line from the so-called ‘race records’ (made for black audiences) of the 1920s, where record catalogues included jazz and gospel music featuring such colourful names as Blind Willie Johnson, Mamie Forehand, Rev. DC Rice, Rev. AW Nix, Rev. JM Gates and the Golden Gate Jubilee Quartet.

“...Judith Durham (later to gain international fame with The Seekers) would also include gospel songs when singing with Sny Chambers’ Jazz Band - including a memorable performance of *The Lord’s Prayer* in Melbourne’s Myer Music Bowl in 1964.



“In Sydney during the 1950s, the Paramount Jazz Band with

Kate Dunbar took up the New Orleans message, to be followed in the early 1960s by Geoff Bull’s Olympia Jazz Band. In the mid-1960s, Adrian Ford formed the York Gospel Singers specifically to perform gospel music... The York group appeared as the support group for a Sydney Town Hall concert featuring US blues singers Sonny Terry and Brownie McGee and were a hit at the 1966 Australian Jazz Convention in Melbourne.

“Australian divas of the genre have included (over the years) Judy Jacques, Kerry Male, Sue Jennings, Kay Younger, Judith Durham, Margret RoadKnight, Kate Dunbar, Alison McCallum, Jeannie Lewis, Lee Gunness, Francine Bell and Carol Ralph.”

More about one of those divas in our next issue. Meanwhile we hope that you will be as excited as we are at the thought of sharing the exuberance of a Christmas with Soul.

“And I thought about how many people have loved those songs. And how many people got through a lot of bad times because of those songs. And how many people enjoyed good times with those songs. And how much those songs really mean. I think it would be great to have written one of those songs. I bet if I wrote one of them, I would be very proud. I hope the people who wrote those songs are happy. I hope they feel it's enough. I really do because they've made me happy. And I'm only one person.”

- Stephen Chbosky,
The Perks of Being a Wallflower

Postscript



Michael Tippett began to compose his oratorio *A Child of Our Time* on September 3, 1939. He was inspired by the horrors of the Jewish pogrom we now know as Kristallnacht.

He struggled to find a way of expressing his feelings, until: “One never-to-be-forgotten Sunday, I heard a singer on the radio sing the Negro spiritual *Steal Away*. At the phrase, ‘The trumpet sounds within my soul’, I was blessed with an immediate intuition: that I was being moved by the phrase in some way beyond what the musical phrase in itself warranted.”

His inclusion of five spirituals at key points of the oratorio was a stroke of genius.

“With a harrowing lament still ringing in the air, the opening lines of the Negro spiritual *Steal Away to Jesus* creep in like a nurse at the bedside of the dying with a comforting authority in the face of despair”, wrote SMH critic Harriet Cunningham of a performance at the Sydney Opera House in 2005. “And what of the spirituals? They could have been a glaring anachronism in a work inspired by European sense and insensibility. But Tippett’s gamble paid off and the Sydney Philharmonia Massed Choir.. sung out true and clear, tapping into the resonance of humanity.”

I was a member of that massed choir, it was the first time I ever sang a major work in such wonderful surroundings with a choir of such musical ability. Singing those spirituals was an intensely moving experience. I was very proud when I read Harriet’s review of my performance: “Those who braved the cold were rewarded by a performance handsomely crafted, beautifully prepared and brilliantly performed”.

It’s interesting to note that Tippett’s work was influenced by Bach’s *St Matthew Passion*, which the choir will perform in our first concert next year. My program notes explain: “The layout [of *Child of Our Time*] follows a scheme of arias, ensembles, choruses and instrumental interludes. Only at certain points do the soloists and chorus represent particular groups and individuals. The story telling, such as it is, is carried forward in accompanied recitative, the bass soloist corresponding at these points to the Evangelist in the Bach Passions. The chorus acts as both observer and participant”.

Cacophony is edited by Peter McCloy on behalf of the Newcastle University Choir, who do not necessarily share the views of the editor. To contribute or to communicate, email us at newsletter@newcastleuniversitychoir.com

For more about Newcastle University Choir, go to www.newcastleuniversitychoir.com