THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

A Personal Recollection by Cedric J. Hayes

Cedric Hayes takes us through his voyage of discovery into a parallel universe within black music. As early rhythm and blues flirted with gospel influences in the late 1950s, soul stylings shaped gospel trends in the coming decades.

It all started back in 1959. Prior to that time my collecting interests were mainly jazz, and I had also just become interested in blues. I had also become interested in discography, although at that time it was still a passive interest. During my national service in the British forces I had been introduced to Vintage Jazz Mart (or ‘The Yellow Peril’ as the proprietor Trevor Benwell termed it), a vehicle for the sale of jazz records, but also with a large number of blues records among the auction/sales lists. Coming towards the end of my conscription period, I purchased a number of records from one particular advertisement, amongst which was the record that was to change my collecting habits, and provide me with a hobby for life.

This record was a twelve inch album of dubbings from a number of gospel records, both pre- and post-1943. I would like to say that it provided my ‘Damascu’s moment, but unlike Saul, I didn’t immediately see the light. I had previously only heard the likes of Blind Willie Johnson, Reverend Gary Davis, Mahalia Jackson and Rosetta Tharpe and Marie Knight, and at that time none had made any significant impact. This record was different.

In addition to singer/guitarists such as Reverend Edward Clayton, it also contained preacher and congregations, and, more importantly, some quartets. Having been brought up, firstly as a child in Sunday School, and then as a youth in a small Church Of England parish church, this music was totally different to what I was used to hearing, and though exciting, took some getting used to.

Over a period of several months I gradually adjusted to these new sounds, and became determined to learn more (and, of course, to hear more).

I soon found this was not an easy task. At that time, there were very few articles on gospel music and it’s practitioners, and these were mostly in obscure and long out-of-print books and magazines. Similarly, it was almost as difficult to obtain, not only information on recordings, but the records in question, because of currency restrictions then in force. However, I persevered and found that two ready sources of data were the various volumes of ‘Jazz Directory’ (which despite its name also included blues and gospel discographies), and Stanley Dance’s ‘Recent American Records’ column in Jazz Journal. Later, Record Research published Blues Research, which consisted of listings of record labels, many of which included gospel records in their output; the highlight was issue six, which was given over entirely to gospel labels.

So I began to compile a discography of sorts, by artist, in alphabetical order, and the first two links in the chain were forged. A third link soon followed.

The Blues Appreciation Society had originally been formed by a number of blues researchers/collectors, but pressure of work had meant it laying dormant for some time. Then Mike Leadbitter was given permission to use the name, and this was when I joined. Shortly afterwards, Mike gained space in the Swiss magazine Jazz Statistics for a blues discographical column, and he kindly gave me a place in it. At this time there had been extensive additions to the earlier issues of Jazz Directory, and the extra help that we were able to receive has meant that the coverage of the period usually referred to as ‘The Golden Age Of Gospel’ has been greatly expanded, whilst there have also been extensive additions to the earlier issues of 1970s and 1980s which had large collections of the later period, and they helped me build up a database.

Then Mike Leadbitter was given permission to use the name, and this was later, in the mid to late 1980s and early 1990s, I had a great deal of help from the UK, Lionel Decoster and Jean Lacombe, and also from Owen KenKnight from the United States, who sent huge amounts of data from their collections, including much information on what came to be called ‘Contemporary Christian’ or ‘Inspirational Gospel’. The name also included blues and gospel discographies, and also had large collections of the later period, and they helped me build up a database. So my thanks go to Michael and Maureen Quantum and Robert Sacre. Later on, in the mid to late 1980s and early 1990s, I had a great deal of help from two French collectors, Lionel Decoster and Jean Lacombe, and also from Owen KenKnight from the United States, who sent huge amounts of data from their collections, including much information on what came to be called ‘Contemporary Christian’ or ‘Inspirational Gospel’. Then at the beginning of this century another jazz collector who was bitten by the gospel bug, Victor Schonfield, from the UK, contacted me and ever since has been a constant source of information.

Like all music, gospel has evolved over the years. From the early harmonies of the Fisk University groups who carried the spirituals all over the USA and then Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to the community based groups of the 1920s, to the 1930s, to the 1940s and 1950s, to the 1960s, to the 1970s, and on to the 1980s and on.

At the same time the gospel songs written by Thomas A. Dorsey, with their collection of blues harmonies, were to inspire a different sound in the churches, and the groups who came from the churches, and this sound was reflected in the recordings of the 1940s and 1950s, a period usually referred to as ‘The Golden Age Of Gospel’. By the 1960s, a new sound was starting to emerge, in place of the acappella quartets, or groups with a minimal accompaniment, full rhythm sections were being used, including the use of one or more guitars and bass guitar. By the late 1960s, the new sound was beginning to take over the gospel scene from the more traditional groups, appealing to a younger audience. As always keeping up to date and influenced by the current soul stylings, came yet another change in the accompaniment, as more electronic instrumentation was used. Following the publication of ‘The Gospel Discography, 1943-1970’, and once the publisher realised that a basis for a further volume existed, we were asked if we would be prepared to work on a volume covering the years 1971-2000, which we agreed to. This meant extra work as two different methods of entering the data had been used.

Having resolved these problems, draft discographies were circulated among collectors and researchers. Several collectors of the 1970s and 1980s who had gone as we concentrated on the period between 1943-1969 (and later to 1980s and on).

As will be noticed, many records are undated, even by a ‘circa’ date. By combining the two books, we were able to include in one volume all these records. The extra help that we were able to receive has meant that the coverage of releases between 1971 and 2000 has been greatly expanded, whilst there have also been extensive additions to the earlier issues of Jazz Directory.

Nevertheless, there is still much to learn about recordings between the years covered, so this book is by no means claiming to be a complete discography of the period.


Label shots courtesy Bob McGrath.