

**“Our Singing Is Not in Vain”:  
A Study of Memphis’ African American Gospel Quartet Culture**

**Cordarius McLean**

*Knee slapping. Hand clapping. Toe tapping. Finger snapping.*

*Two step. Spin around. Slide to the left, slide to the right!*

*Lights! Camera! Action!*

During the 1920s and 1930s, these lively actions and dynamic phrases would have never been attributed to the gospel quartet—a genre of religious music that was gaining momentum and popularity at the time. Deemed worldly and secular in nature, such activity would have been frowned upon by conservative African American Christians, interested more in ministry than entertainment. While spreading the gospel through song was the primary responsibility of the African American gospel quartet, it was the performance style (whether subdued, as was in the early years of Black gospel quartet popularity, or flashy, as was in the later years of the genre’s reign) that would eventually aid in the transferal of the religious messages in quartet songs and ultimately win over audiences. Ministry and performance worked together to establish the gospel quartet as a staple in African American gospel music.

Black American gospel music has received inadequate attention in academia, mainly because of the heightened focus on other secular genres such as blues, jazz, and pop. Arguably one of the most important styles of gospel music, the gospel quartet

tradition has been one of the most neglected of the subgenres.<sup>1</sup> Christopher “Kip” Lornell is among the very few scholars who have explored the gospel quartet genre; Lornell deals particularly with the significance of the genre in Memphis, Tennessee. Lornell’s *“Happy in the Service of the Lord”* is a prominent work in the literature on Memphis’ African American gospel quartets because of its intense focus on the relationship between the quartet genre and the Mid-South region and the ways in which they influenced one another. As primary and secondary sources as well as original interviews both complement and contradict one another, the place of the gospel quartet—a vital institution in African American life and culture for several decades—in academia becomes much clearer. This paper functions as both a familiar (in that it presents previous thoughts and findings on the topic) and fresh (in that it simultaneously offers new perspective, ideas, and themes to the discussion) addition to the body of literature that currently exists on African American gospel quartets.

## **The Beginning**

Gospel music is defined by Lornell as “any type of religious music, regardless of age or origin.”<sup>2</sup> Alan Young argues, however, that not all African American religious music can be considered “gospel.” He asserts that gospel music, although “firmly based

---

<sup>1</sup> Kip Lornell, *“Happy in the Service of the Lord”*: *Afro-American Gospel Quartets in Memphis*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Lornell, “Happy in the Service of the Lord: Afro-American Gospel Quartets in Memphis, Tennessee” (Ph.D. diss., Memphis State University, Dec. 1983), 11.

in religion,” is both arranged and composed with performance in mind.<sup>3</sup> This intersection of religious orientation and popular performance is an important element of African American gospel quartet culture that will be dealt with in this paper. No matter how gospel music is defined, however, it cannot be viewed simply as a style of music. Belief and faith in God coupled with passionate performance nourish gospel music and make it relevant to African American churchgoers and record buyers. According to Melvin Mosley—manager and lead singer of the Spirit of Memphis, true appreciation for gospel stems from an inner spirit: “If you are a spiritually inclined person, you can relate to the emotion of getting caught up, and to words that relate to the awareness of God.”<sup>4</sup> The spirit and passion that accompany gospel music are definitely key elements of the African American gospel quartet.

The African American gospel quartet is characterized by several traits, including:

1. A vocal group consisting of four, five or six voices
2. An ensemble that stresses four-part harmony. When a group consists of more than four voices, some either drop-out or double-up on one part temporarily.
3. “An ensemble that performs either a cappella or with minimal instrumental accompaniment” (generally including guitar, keyboards, bass and percussion)<sup>5</sup>

The four-part harmony stressed consists typically of either first tenor, second tenor, baritone, and bass parts, or alto, tenor, baritone, and bass parts. Instrumental

---

<sup>3</sup> Alan Young, *Woke Me Up This Morning: Black Gospel Singers and the Gospel Life. American Made Music Singers.* (Jackson: Jackson University Press of Mississippi, 1997), xx.

<http://relay.rhodes.edu:2048/login?url=http://www.netL...> (accessed July 9, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>5</sup> Lornell, “Happy in the Service of the Lord,” 12.

accompaniment was not added to gospel quartet performances until the late 1930s; a cappella renditions of traditional songs and spirituals characterized the gospel quartet repertoire until that time.

The birth of the American gospel quartet provides a point of contention among scholars. Opinions vary in regard to time period, region, and initial style. Young writes:

The earliest written reference to African American quartets appeared in 1851, when Frederika Bremer wrote of hearing Virginia slaves singing in “quartettes.” These ensembles were informal groups, without the element of organization and arrangement that characterizes a formally constituted quartet.<sup>6</sup>

More recently, Lornell argues that Black gospel quartet music is rooted in the traditional Black music that followed the Civil War, which was the era of minstrelsy: “The music portion of the three-part minstrels in the 1860s consisted of instrumental numbers as well as vocal numbers, often performed by ‘quartettes.’”<sup>7</sup> The formation of college and university quartets (modeled after college jubilee groups such as the Fisk Jubilee Singers) also had an influence on the Black gospel quartet tradition. Because quartets consisted of fewer singers, universities could send them out less expensively than jubilee groups to raise even more money for the school while also promoting the institution’s educational reputation and music education quality. “Their precise influence on later gospel quartets

---

<sup>6</sup> Young, *Woke Me Up This Morning*, 52-53.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 25-26.

is difficult to evaluate, but college quartets were clearly an important forerunner of the popular quartets in the late 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s.”<sup>8</sup>

Moving from minstrels and college groups to specific gospel groups, the Golden Gate Quartet, established in 1934, in Norfolk, Virginia, was one of the first small gospel ensembles to focus on the close-harmony, jubilee sound. Their matching tailored suits and tight performances introduced a newfound professionalism into gospel music. Their fast-paced, intricate style and harmony in both sound and appearance made the Golden Gate Quartet precursors in the gospel quartet tradition as is known today; they played a major role in establishing quartet music as the dominant gospel sound.<sup>9</sup>

The formation of specific quartet groups over time has occurred in several different ways. James Weldon Johnson offered an interesting perspective on the formation of quartets in the Black community when he stated:

Pick up four colored boys or young men anywhere and the chances are ninety out of a hundred that you have a quartet. Let one of them sing the melody and others will naturally find the parts. Indeed, it may be said that all male Negro youth of the United States is divided into quartets. . . .In the days when such a thing as a white barber was unknown in the South, every barbershop had its quartet and the young men spent their leisure time “harmonizing.”<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., xxvi.

<sup>10</sup> Lornell, “Happy in the Service of the Lord,” 42.

Johnson's assessment suggests quartet singing a mere pastime of African American youth; this pastime would eventually become a livelihood for many. Most quartet members began their music careers (whether professional, semi-professional, or non-professional) in their late teens or early twenties, joining family-oriented, church-related, or—more typically early on—local business-owned groups. The young ages of these performers were probably essential to the quartet genre's popularity lasting as long as it did because the young quartet generation was able to grow in the style together.

Although associated primarily with the African American church, the jubilee quartet was born in the workplace.<sup>11</sup> Local businesses provided convenient meeting and rehearsal spaces for Memphis quartets.<sup>12</sup> Quartets were named early on for the companies that sponsored them. The Orval Brothers Quartet, for example, was sponsored by the Orval Brothers Construction Company. This naming procedure benefited both parties in that the quartet received both funding and rehearsal space from the business while offering a form of advertising for their sponsor. These names undoubtedly offered pride and a sense of belonging to a specific place for the young quartet members. Paying dues, electing officers, wearing uniforms, and meeting and rehearsing regularly, these young quartets operated themselves similar to the businesses they represented, establishing a model that quartets follow to this day.

Not all quartets, however, were sponsored by and named after local businesses. Many quartets steered away from the forming commercial networks by aligning

---

<sup>11</sup> Horace C. Boyer, *How Sweet the Sound: The Golden Age of Gospel*. Washington, D.C.: Elliott and Clark Publishing, 1995.

<sup>12</sup> Lornell, "*Happy in the Service of the Lord*," 76.

themselves with their home churches or neighborhoods.<sup>13</sup> This is demonstrated by groups such as the Orange Mound Specials, who paid tribute to the Orange Mound community via their name. Furthermore, the Spirit of Memphis first went by the moniker *TM&S Singers* because they assembled from various community churches (*Tree of Life*, *Mount Olive*, and *St. Matthew's*—all Baptist churches). As the popularity of the genre increased, quartets began to break the constraints of their ties to specific organizations (both religious and commercial) for a more regional appeal, as demonstrated by the Spirit of Memphis. These name changes were important to many quartets seeking to move beyond local, amateur activity and into professional singing careers.

Quartet names provide an interesting contrast with the quartets' song titles and themes.<sup>14</sup> As mentioned previously, groups tended to opt for regional association and appeal via their names; however, their present home was no match for the Heaven these groups longed to experience, according to their songs. Names with local and regional associations (e.g. Southern Jubilees, Orange Mound Specials, Spirit of Memphis) permeate the gospel quartet tradition, yet song titles included "Home in the Sky" and "Automobile to Glory" (both by the Spirit of Memphis).<sup>15</sup> The quartets identified themselves by where they were from but sang both passionately and frequently about where they desired to be.

### **The Men, the Music, the Message**

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 75.

Harmony—along with vocal timbre and rhythm—is a vital aspect of gospel quartet music. Other elements include:

- Meter: most always duple. Early on, time signatures were typically 2/4 or 4/4; however, new time signatures of 12/8 and 6/8 were added and were deemed “gospel meter.”<sup>16</sup>
- Tonality: “overwhelmingly major”<sup>17</sup>
- Texture: usually homophonic
- Pronounced bass: especially distinctive of prewar quartets<sup>18</sup>
- Form: typically verse-chorus or AbAbAb, where A is a stable chorus, and B consists of an improvised and changing lead part.

Songs performed by quartets are mostly fast; groups occasionally contrast these fast-paced songs with a slow one in their recordings and performances. Most of the material performed by gospel quartets is considered public domain; groups simply rearrange them, adding their personal style to the songs.<sup>19</sup> When groups do perform original material, however, they differentiate themselves from secular writers, claiming that their songs are delivered to them directly from God. Darryl Artison—formerly of the Southern Nightingales, and currently the founder, manager, booking agent, writer, leader singer, and guitarist of Spiritual Excitement—asserts that his father, Pastor Aubrey Artison, taught him and his fellow group members at a very early age to write their own material:

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Young, *Woke Me Up This Morning*, 71.

“I’ll say 98% of the time, we sing our own material. God-inspired songs. God-inspired songs, and then He allows us to use experience with it and to put these songs together, and that’s what we have.”<sup>20</sup> Artison asserts that while original material is ideal, it is important for a quartet to get a feel for their audience when performing: “[I]f they seem to like “Amazing Grace,” and if you’ve gotten, a group has got more songs of that style, then...kind of be good to stay with that.”<sup>21</sup>

Because both the quartet and the audience are key players in the African American gospel quartet performance tradition, the quartet has a dual task—to both entertain and minister to their audience.<sup>22</sup> The gospel group, nevertheless, is at an advantage compared to secular music groups because the message of the quartet is based on a shared religious experience that permeates African American life and culture.

Young explains this dynamic:

A secular group has to win the audience to succeed; a gospel group has to lose the audience to fail. Gospel groups can be more passionate than their secular counterparts because they are singing about religious faith, a stronger emotion than the romantic love which is the staple of pop music. . . a gospel singer’s message connects directly with the audience’s firsthand experiences and beliefs, enabling a deeper rapport between singer and audience and fueling the intensity of the performance.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> Darryl Artison interviewed by author, July 10, 2007, Memphis, Tennessee (tape in possession of author).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Young, *Woke Me Up This Morning*, 64.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 64.

The common belief in African American religious discourse that love for God is more legitimate than romantic (or worldly) love was apparent in the early years of the gospel quartet tradition. The focus then was mainly on ministry to the people and relationship with the Lord, and was characterized typically in subdued, a cappella performances in which quartets sang with soft dynamics and clear diction. Before long, this style of group singing began to fade:

The “jubilee” emphasis on a smooth sound with sweet harmonies and often no definable lead singer was replaced by the “hard quartets”—groups led by one or two powerful lead singers and aiming to “wreck the house” by producing such an overpowering performance that the audience was reduced to shouting hysteria.<sup>24</sup>

The gentle and restrained style of quartet jubilee singing saw its last days upon the arrival of hard quartets with their instrumentation and exaggerated performance styles.

During the 1950s, instruments penetrated the African American gospel quartet performance. Possibly in response to the popular doo-wop groups performing in the secular arena, quartets were adding instrumentation to fill out their sound and make their music more competitive with other recorded music.<sup>25</sup> Darryl Artison adds:

[Quartets] just started out a cappella, and then they slowly went to piano or guitar, and then they added the bass, and then—lo and behold—Lord, have mercy, somebody walked in the church with a set of drums! And it built from there. Then somebody threw back in the keyboards. And I

---

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., xxvi.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., xxvii.

believe it was the Mighty Clouds of Joy who really came in with a full, basically what you might say a full band—piano, organ, guitars, bass and drums.<sup>26</sup>

Artison continues to assert the importance of instrumentation, claiming that even now his group Spiritual Excitement occasionally utilizes a horn section to please the ear and to help communicate the message. With the typical lineup of instruments now including one or two guitars, bass guitar, drums, and keyboards (including piano, organ, and/or electronic synthesizers), the singing style of African American gospel quartets has been directly affected: “[T]he bass singer has all but gone, replaced by the bass guitar and the lower register of the keyboards, and the vocal structure is now usually one lead singer with a narrow-range harmony background.”<sup>27</sup>

Extravagant movements by lead and background singers were also a novel addition to the performance style of gospel quartets. Early groups often developed formal, restrained choreography; however, hard quartets began utilizing the whole stage, “running from side to side, falling on one or both knees or even leaving the stage to sing among the audience.”<sup>28</sup> Melvin Mosley—current manager and lead singer of the Spirit of Memphis—states, “By being the lead singer, I move a lot when I’m singing. . . .But if I just stand here and sing my lyrics, well, I may just bob my head, then you’ll bob your head. But if I move, before you know it, you’ll move.”<sup>29</sup> Mosley’s description of his

---

<sup>26</sup> Artison interview.

<sup>27</sup> Young, *Woke Me Up This Morning*, xxviii.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, xxvii.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

performance style as lead singer of a quartet exemplifies the emphasis on performance and communication with the audience that is prevalent in the African American gospel quartet genre. The combination of song, rhetoric, dance, and interactive praise enables people in the congregation, or the audience, to share in the quartet experience.

The addition of instrumentation and more “showy” movements to the African American gospel quartet tradition was not widely accepted immediately. Many gospel performers and listeners alike were taken aback by this new style that seemingly placed the performance aspect of the quartet tradition above the ministry element they felt to be more important. Considered worldly by this group, the new style of the hard quartets was believed to be contradictory to the message the quartets were attempting to send through their songs. This style, nevertheless, became hugely popular in the gospel scene and highly demanded at programs—extensions of Sunday morning worship services, defined as “cultural ceremonies by quartet singers with religious worship as the primary goal.”<sup>30</sup> According to Melvin Mosley, older groups, still holding on to their original jubilee style, became discouraged and eventually began to disband because they felt their message was no longer being heard.<sup>31</sup> Mosley, however, feels that no matter the style in which they sing and perform, effective quartets will both communicate their message and please God: “We’re [the Spirit of Memphis] so effective because when I sing to an audience, I’m really singing to God. I’m glorying God. And I feel like if He’s pleased, then He will shower His spirit down on the audience, if He’s please with what I’m singing to

---

<sup>30</sup> Lornell, “*Happy in the Service of the Lord*,” 96.

<sup>31</sup> Melvin Mosley interviewed by author, July 17, 2007, Memphis, Tennessee (tape in possession of author).

Him.”<sup>32</sup> Mosley suggests that as long as the quartet singers have faith in whom they are singing to and in that what they are singing is the right thing, God will take care of the rest; the inner spirit/Christianity—if it is truly in both the performer and the spectator—will not be overshadowed by the performance style.

Along with the programs held on Sunday afternoons and evenings at community churches, Memphis gospel quartets (especially in the 1920s and 1930s) sang in various auditoriums, schools, and hospitals. They even sang at box suppers to raise money for churches that would, in turn, split the profits equally with the quartet.<sup>33</sup> On engaging the Memphis community outside of performing, Darryl Artison asserts, “Yeah, we do believe in doing that because it goes back to what I said, having Christ on the inside. There are times when people need, we know people need help with something, and we know that it’s a worthy cause.”<sup>34</sup> Artison’s group, Spiritual Excitement, firmly believes that everything is about the Lord and that Christian duty commits us to aiding our fellow citizens. Melvin Mosley has similar thoughts: “The biggest thing to me is to reach someone.”<sup>35</sup> Whether giving directly or offering spiritual help through song, Memphis quartets appear to be committed to their communities.

---

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Theo Wade interviewed by Kip Lornell, October 1979, Memphis, Tennessee (All transcripts of interviews conducted by Kip Lornell can be found in Memphis Black Gospel Quartet Singers Oral History Collection, Series 26, Box/Volume 2 of 2, Mississippi Valley Collection, Ned R. McWherter Library, University of Memphis.).

<sup>34</sup> Artison interview.

<sup>35</sup> Mosley interview.

In their formative years, quartets were associated with many fundamental social structures of the Black community: schools, families, places of employment, and—most importantly—churches. Quartets were highly respected and supported by their communities because of their connection to the community. Quartets were traditionally the gospel performers most connected with their communities, offering assistance and spiritual relief to their fellow community members as well as something positive to do regularly for Black youth interested in singing.<sup>36</sup> Black youth, who were denied access to other entertainment venues in mainstream culture, could turn to quartet rehearsals and programs for a place to go. They could invest their time in this worthwhile craft while simultaneously enjoying the camaraderie of belonging to a sort of a club, which is often the term quartet singers use when talking about their groups.<sup>37</sup>

### **The Gospel Goes Pop**

The rise in popularity of the Black gospel quartet genre was very rapid. By the late 1930s, professional performers were coming into Memphis regularly. These visiting performers (e.g. the Soul Stirrers and the Pilgrim Travelers, both from Texas) brought a shift in style to the gospel music scene for Memphis quartets and their audiences. While Memphis groups were reserved in their styles of song and dress because of their close connections to the Church of Christ, Baptist, and Methodist churches and made appearances in the appropriate manner, the outsiders introduced the high-energy and

---

<sup>36</sup> Young, *Woke Me Up This Morning*, 52.

<sup>37</sup> Lornell, Christopher. “Happy in the Service of the Lord,” 50.

flashy-dressed performance elements that are commonly attributed to the gospel quartet tradition today.<sup>38</sup>

Another aspect of gospel music performance that these visitors introduced to Memphians was the performance of religious music for pay. Quartet singing offered Black men the opportunity to travel and earn both income and recognition when very few other opportunities were open to them. Jubilee quartets such as the Famous Blue Jay Singers and the Soul Stirrers played an integral role during the gospel quartet tradition's transitional period (1935-1944) from a local pastime to a full-time profession.<sup>39</sup> These quartets were among the first to trade full-time employment at secure jobs for the professional life of quartet singing. Considered bad in the 1920s, because of its connection to secular activity, singing for money soon became typical in the gospel quartet genre.<sup>40</sup> By the late 1940s, hundreds of Black quartets were touring the entire country extensively.<sup>41</sup> This was a critical change in practice in Memphis; Memphis' gospel quartets did not even consider singing professionally until the late 1940s. Memphis quartets were receiving encouragement from larger gospel networks to turn professional and to tour the country, but they did not want to be pushed. Most gospel quartets in Memphis wanted to sustain their community ties and continue to support the churches and local communities that had supported them over the years.<sup>42</sup> By the 1950s, African American gospel quartets were a major force in Black American music, which

---

<sup>38</sup> Lornell, Kip. "*Happy in the Service of the Lord*," 45.

<sup>39</sup> Lornell, Christopher. "*Happy in the Service of the Lord*," 58.

<sup>40</sup> Wade interview.

<sup>41</sup> Lornell, "*Happy in the Service of the Lord*," 62.

<sup>42</sup> Lornell, "*Happy in the Service of the Lord*," 47.

meant leaving the comfort of the Mid-South, touring new places, and exposing themselves to new people and ideas were all possibilities for Memphis quartets.

Professional quartets traveled around the country in what were called “gospel packages.”<sup>43</sup> Several groups would get together and tour various cities, sharing the stage night to night. Travel patterns were correlated to the degree of professional status of each quartet. Professional groups made frequent trips outside of the Mid-South because 1) they could afford to (with respect to time *and* money) and 2) they had to because that was their profession! With professional quartets performing at the southern, northern, eastern, and western-most parts of the country, it becomes obvious that it “[t]ake more than singing to be professional.”<sup>44</sup> In order for a group to go professional, they and their music must first be wanted by consumers, and they must have mass media support.

Darryl Artison stresses, “There is a business, big business side to quartet singing. . . .The group just can’t really do it themselves.”<sup>45</sup> Marketing and communication are mentioned by both Artison and Mosley as key elements to any group making the move to professional status. A major difference between a sharp local group and a professional group (besides the fact that professional groups performed their music for a living) was that the professional group typically marketed itself with a radio station, acquiring the mass media support necessary to thrive in the professional arena. When the professional group did establish themselves with a radio station, “they would get a whole lot more airplay and getting their songs into the listening ear, so when they came to town. . .they

---

<sup>43</sup> Mosley interview.

<sup>44</sup> Julius Readers interviewed by Kip Lornell, May 28, 1982, Memphis, Tennessee.

<sup>45</sup> Artison interview.

basically had a hit song. And they were more or less kind of idolized a little bit better than the local artists.”<sup>46</sup>

Financial security and familial ties posed challenges to groups that wanted to pursue professional opportunities. Becoming semi-professional, thus, became the next best thing. “[S]emi-professional groups are just as good, really, as professional, if you want to use that. The only difference in that is that the semi-professional group maybe travels twice to three times out of a month versus the quote unquote professional group, they’re on the road all the time.”<sup>47</sup> Semi-professional quartet singers were basically men and women who loved to sing and were willing to travel but had to be back in time for work on Monday mornings. These quartet members maintained regular jobs (including everything from teaching to banking to construction) and supported families while performing their music when convenient. In order for the semi-professional quartet lifestyle to work, according to Artison:

[Y]ou have to learn balance. A person, be it man or woman, that sings quartet music have to learn balance, especially if you, if a person has a family. . . you have to learn balance. I would, and I stress that to my guys now. And your booking agent, whoever does the booking for the group, has to have heart and to say, even sometimes, you can say that I’m gonna leave this weekend open or I’m gonna leave these two weekends open. Sometimes it’s even good to leave a whole month open and just balance it out to where different ones have a chance to go out of town a little bit with

---

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

their families or just go to different other things besides just performing, and just to rest, just to rest.<sup>48</sup>

Artison deems balance the most important element in making a semi-professional quartet career work. The importance of family and its prioritization is apparent in Artison's statement. In addition to family and employment issues, record deals and recording exposure were not readily available to most semi-professional groups as they were to professional groups. This lack prevented semi-professional groups from reaching wider audiences. Because their audience was primarily local, semi-professional quartets arranged engagements outside of the city through personal connections (i.e. friendships, familial ties) rather than through major gospel networks.

Differentiating between the employment statuses of Memphis' African American gospel quartets provides an interesting point of contention between Christopher Lornell and Spiritual Excitement's Darryl Artison. Lornell categorizes Memphis quartets into three clear categories—professional, semi-professional, and non-professional—recognizing the business aspect of quartet singing that pervaded the genre from the late 1930s, to the early 1960s. Darryl Artison argues, however, that there was no extreme case of a professional group in Memphis, including even the Spirit of Memphis: “It really hasn't been. . .just an extreme professional, ‘this is my living’ group from Memphis—not African American anyway.”<sup>49</sup> While these two may disagree on the professional statuses of Memphis' quartets, the gospel quartet genre's saturation of

---

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Artison interview.

African American life and culture in Memphis made the prospect of performing quartet music for pay more promising as the years passed.

As the popularity of the genre grew even greater, and Memphis quartets began to be accepted by a wider spread regional audience, relationships with media sources—primarily record labels and radio stations—grew stronger.<sup>50</sup> During the late 1940s and early 1950s, few Memphis quartets were recorded. Julius Readers states: “[Y]ou mostly had to be like a superstar mostly to get on a big label. That’s why it took the gospel so long to get off the ground as far as recording was concerned.”<sup>51</sup> Readers went on to tell of Kyle Wooten, a record producer who heard of all the unrecorded talent in Memphis and came to the city to take advantage of the untapped quartet sound.

I don’t really know where he came from, but after he learnt that we had over . . .300 gospel singers here in this town, I guess he learned about all these good singers here and nobody was cutting them. He came in here and set a flat fee and went to work. He recorded practically everybody here in Memphis, and everybody around Memphis. He recorded a lot of folks, a lot of good groups.<sup>52</sup>

Wooten played a major role in getting the African American gospel quartet sound heard around the region. Artists did not mind paying his fee of \$350-400, because they knew they were guaranteed to be seen and heard after recording with him.

---

<sup>50</sup> Lornell, “*Happy in the Service of the Lord*,” 104.

<sup>51</sup> Readers interview.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

Along with the booming recording industry, radio became another outlet for the promotion of African American gospel quartet music. Quartets began broadcasting when the radio industry was in its early stages. Most programs were produced in the stations' studios and broadcasted live. Gospel quartets were among all types of local talent featured on the radio broadcasts. From dance bands to hillbilly musicians, many local performers were given significant media exposure due to the radio industry that was then establishing its importance as a popular American medium.<sup>53</sup> WDIA-AM 1070 was one of the first radio stations to broadcast Black gospel programming in Memphis, making it influential in exposing people across the Mid-South to gospel music.<sup>54</sup> Brother Theo Wade—former member of the Spirit of Memphis who retired to a career in radio—used his Saturday night slot on WDIA to showcase local talent. On his “Hallelujah Jubilee” show, 80-90% of the music was performed by quartets. Darryl Artison describes the importance of radio in previewing and promoting upcoming quartet programs: “But people hovered the radio more, and what they heard on the radio, that is what they perceived in their brain. And that’s what helped to impact and influence people to come out to service.”<sup>55</sup> Artison Huddie Moore adds: “It was pretty important, like you was going to have a program on Sunday evening. When you do your broadcast, you announce where you gonna be. . . .It will help swell your crowd for the program.”<sup>56</sup> Quartets utilize this medium to showcase their talent to a wider range of people and to

---

<sup>53</sup> Lornell, “Happy in the Service of the Lord,” 53.

<sup>54</sup> “Gospel Academy salutes area talent.” *Commercial Appeal*, 17 Mar. 1991, sec. G1.

<sup>55</sup> Artison interview.

<sup>56</sup> Huddie Moore interviewed by Kip Lornell, February 2, 1983, Memphis, Tennessee.

attract larger crowds to their performances. Julius Readers goes one step further than Artison and Moore, stating: “Without airplay, you really was dead.”<sup>57</sup>

Gospel music in all its variety benefited from the influence of radio broadcasting. Because of the heightened popularity of radio, the gospel music style that grew out of traditional spirituals and anthems (dating back to the pre-Civil War time period) was being influenced by secular music genres such as blues, jazz, and soul.<sup>58</sup> This blending of traditional and modern styles created a “highly emotional form of musical expression” that had become one of the Mid-South’s liveliest forms of African American music.<sup>59</sup>

As radio brought more attention to the gospel quartet genre, quartet singers became more popular in both the religious and secular music arenas. As a result, quartets (and especially lead singers) began being targeted to record and perform secular music. Lornell describes how lead singers sometimes overshadowed their groups’ successes:

While many of the “hard gospel quartets were also quite popular during the 1950s, their featured singers sometimes eclipsed the groups’ success by becoming well-known favorites among fans. Sam Cooke of the Soul Stirrer provides a fine example of this process. He gradually moved from a member of the group, to the featured singer, and finally into the secular world, where [he] enjoyed a strong career as a solo artist until his death in 1964.<sup>60</sup>

---

<sup>57</sup> Readers interview.

<sup>58</sup> “Group Offers ‘Hallelujah Holiday,’” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, 5 Dec. 1980, Showcase, sec. 8.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Lornell, “Happy in the Service of the Lord,” 66.

Several quartet members switched genres when their ensemble reached the peak of its commercial popularity. Suggesting reasons these quartet singers moved from gospel to rhythm and blues, Harry Winfield asserts: “One was money. Number two was popularity, and number three was their appreciation of the art. They only had one day per week that they could be stars, which was Sundays.”<sup>61</sup> Fame and the love of money continued to draw popular quartet singers from gospel stages; however, for the several quartet singers who crossed over, many more remained loyal (some completely, others for the most part) to their gospel beginnings. Darryl Artison explains that some musicians performed at nightclubs occasionally for extra money, “But they still stuck with gospel music. Really the biggest focal point is you’ve got to have Christ inside in order for you to stay with your call, to stay with what you do.”<sup>62</sup> He understands that secular music had some influence on different aspects of gospel quartet style, but he holds the quartet responsible for keeping their message and performances Christ-like. Melvin Mosley expresses similar thoughts: “It’s (secular music) not that much different from gospel—it’s just the awareness of God in gospel, the awareness that he is alive and you’re gonna praise him. . . .The musical changes, like from C, F to G, are basically the same, but you’re singing different words.”<sup>63</sup> While several African American gospel quartet singers switched musical genres, whether completely or just occasionally to help

---

<sup>61</sup> Winfield, Harry interviewed by Ray Allen, July 14, 1982, Memphis, Tennessee, (transcript in Memphis Black Gospel Quartet Singers Oral History Collection, Series 26, Box/Volume 2 of 2, Mississippi Valley Collection, Ned R. McWherter Library, University of Memphis).

<sup>62</sup> Artison interview.

<sup>63</sup> Young, *Woke Me Up This Morning*, 75.

make ends meet, there was one group who remained steadfast in the traditional gospel sound—the Spirit of Memphis.

### **The Spirit of Memphis**

Originally the TM&S Singers (formed in 1928), the Spirit of Memphis Quartet changed their name in 1930, under the headship of James Darling who suggested the new moniker derived from the *Spirit of St. Louis*—the aircraft Charles Lindbergh flew over the Atlantic in 1927.<sup>64</sup> The group eventually dropped the “Quartet” in their new name and simply became the Spirit of Memphis. The Spirit of Memphis generally had (and still has) a highly respected reputation in both the gospel music scene and the Memphis community. “The Spirit of Memphis in many ways encapsulates the history of gospel quartet activity in Memphis. The group. . .is unquestionably the best known and most commercially successful home-grown black gospel group.”<sup>65</sup> They played an integral role in popularizing the quartet tradition as a profession during the years immediately after World War II. The Spirit of Memphis became Memphis’ first fulltime professional quartet in 1949, after experiencing the successes of their regular broadcasts over WDIA and of their first nationally-distributed commercial record entitled “Happy in the Service of the Lord/My Life Is in His Hands.”<sup>66</sup>

The Spirit of Memphis experienced high status within the African American community, earning salaries of \$200 a week and proving that it was possible to perform

---

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Lornell, “*Happy in the Service of the Lord*,” 39.

<sup>66</sup> Young, *Woke Me Up This Morning*, 73.

religious music and enjoy substantial incomes simultaneously.<sup>67</sup> “We made a lot of money, bought cars, homes, boats and things.”<sup>68</sup> The Spirit of Memphis, however, spent most of the 1950s, touring fulltime nationwide, traveling as far as Oakland, California, and Newark, New Jersey, packing various venues both in and out of Memphis. According to Melvin Mosley: “Back in the day, you know, we didn’t have to have three, four, and five groups to try to draw a crowd.”<sup>69</sup> The assurance with which Mosley speaks about his group is well-earned and deserved, for the Spirit of Memphis was able to successfully break the constraints of the Mid-South circuit and continue in the tradition of gospel quartet music on a much larger scale.

Though the most popular and most successful of Memphis’ African American gospel quartets, the Spirit of Memphis was not highly regarded by everyone in Memphis. Eli Ruffin, one of the founders of the Orange Mound Specials speaks of the Spirit of Memphis:

You know, they never did progress none. Now, they got some good voices in there. See, you can have some good voices, but you still don’t bring in nothing. The [Spirit of Memphis] got some beautiful voices, but if I was their trainer, I would change them. And they would be hot. I’d stop so much hollering and I’d pick my numbers.<sup>70</sup>

Ruffin’s perspective is one that is unexpected and novel in the literature on Memphis’ gospel quartets. Whereas most other former quartet singers and gospel enthusiasts refer

---

<sup>67</sup> Lornell, “*Happy in the Service of the Lord*,” 52.

<sup>68</sup> Wade interview.

<sup>69</sup> Mosley interview.

<sup>70</sup> Eli Ruffin interviewed by Kip Lornell, March 2, 1981, Memphis, Tennessee.

to the Spirit of Memphis as popular and influential musicians, Ruffin—one of the three major quartet trainers (along with Gus Miller and Elijah Jones) in the area—notes the “Spirit of Memphis trouble” with hollering, suggesting “there’s no music in it.”<sup>71</sup>

Regardless of anyone’s opinion of the Spirit of Memphis, the success they experienced for over seventy years cannot be denied. The Spirit of Memphis received the Governor’s Award in 2001 (for Most Outstanding Quartet); was honored with their very own block on the Walk of Fame in Nashville; and was inducted into the Gospel Hall of Fame in 1983. The group was even the first to sing in integrated shows, having performed alongside the Blackwood Brothers (Memphis’ most famous White quartet) as well as Elvis Presley.

When the quartet genre began to fade in popularity during the early 1960s, the Spirit of Memphis “came off the road” in 1962, moving from fulltime gospel quartet singing to semi-professional status; they were (and continue to be), nevertheless, a top gospel group in the city of Memphis, the country, and the world.<sup>72</sup> They make appearances now only when they are convenient for every single person in the group.<sup>73</sup> Throughout the years, the quartet has experienced numerous personnel changes for various reasons; however, the Spirit of Memphis still performs in the traditional Black gospel quartet style. This style, according to Mosley, is all about keeping it [the music/performance] basic. On the success and longevity of the Spirit of Memphis, Harry Winfield states:

---

<sup>71</sup> Ruffin interview.

<sup>72</sup> Young, *Woke Me Up This Morning*, 73.

<sup>73</sup> Mosley interview.

Those fellows came along during an era that created, first of all their style, the era of that was that quartet singing was very acceptable, very highly regarded, very into the Memphis community. People respected them and kept them going for a long time. I feel their particular kind of music and the kind of market they stayed with for a long time, more or less, made them stay together as a group. Meaning that they had a built-in and they didn't have to look for people to support them.<sup>74</sup>

A number of local quartets, such as the Wells Spirituals, respected the Spirit of Memphis and patterned themselves after the group. “[I]t all originated with this group. So we have a good feeling. If they had another hundred groups here, it would make us feel good, because it’s something that came after this group got the ball rolling.”<sup>75</sup> Loyal to their fans, community, and each other, the Spirit of Memphis has retained their credibility and enjoyed decades of success together. On the Spirit of Memphis, Young concludes: “The group is an institution, a legend that transcends individuals.”<sup>76</sup>

### **The Quartet Wanes**

The Spirit of Memphis was not the only group to be forced off the road in the early 1960s. The gospel quartet genre that had permeated nearly every aspect—religious, social, cultural, professional—of African American life began to lose its intensity in the 1960s, resulting in the disbanding of several groups and sending talented musicians and

---

<sup>74</sup> Winfield interview.

<sup>75</sup> Mosley interview.

<sup>76</sup> Young, *Woke Me Up This Morning*, 67.

singers back to regular jobs. Quartet singing in Memphis lost the majority of its support and experienced a decline in mainstream popularity. Several opinions on the contributing factors to the decline of quartet popular exist in both popular and private discourse.

Lornell proposes “the increasing secularization that pervaded every phase of black gospel music” as one of the strong reasons for the genre’s decline.<sup>77</sup> Harry Winfield offers a similar assessment, speaking of the deception on the part of quartets who allowed themselves to be influenced so by the blues and by worldly activity.

[Y]ou can’t sing church and blues, too...Here I really fell in love with you as a gospel personality, and oh how I love [the] way you sing whatever. . .but the quartet singers were now processing their hair and riding in [Cadillac’s]. . . .This is what people do in the world. There is really no separation between the two. You are now drinking, and getting drunk. . . .This is quite a deception to the people. People like the [Spirit of Memphis] remained very clean, remained very respectable, head to their art, kept the look of refinement and sophistication in that group, even today. Therefore, they just stayed at the top, while these other groups started submerging and dropping out.<sup>78</sup>

As gospel music became evermore influenced by rhythm and blues, quartets were changing their style and basically giving performances. This blending of sacred and secular practice was not perceived well by devout Christians who sought the religious messages in music rather than the shows these developing quartets were giving. George

---

<sup>77</sup> Lornell, “*Happy in the Service of the Lord*,” 59.

<sup>78</sup> Winfield interview.

Rooks shared the concerns of many other disapproving worshippers when he asserted, “If you gonna serve God, serve God. If you gonna serve the Devil, then just put it all over in that category.”<sup>79</sup> The fact that many of these quartet singers became so caught up in their acts and their fame that they were no longer seeking, praising, or worshipping the Lord, praying to Him, or attending regular church services belittled their reputation and contributed to their decline.

The emergence of choirs, choruses, and community groups played an important role in the decrease of quartet fame. Younger audiences over time acquired a preference for more contemporary gospel music, consisting of a fuller and more organized sound that included more females in the musical experience. Interestingly enough Darryl Artison became quite defensive when discussing this aspect of quartet culture. He thinks that members of the choirs that were gaining popularity during this period were not being judged as harshly as were the quartet singers who were experiencing backlash based on their behavior. Artison admits that not all quartet singers were as spiritual or religious as expected and that some were dealing with numerous problems in life (e.g. alcoholism, fornication), but he is concerned they were judged more severely than choir members who were frequently homosexual, which is “an abomination to the Lord.”<sup>80</sup> He emphasizes: “REAL MEN sing in quartets; REAL WOMEN sing in quartets! That can be straightened out within a heartbeat versus homosexuality that takes time to deal with.”<sup>81</sup> Artison is not trying to cover up the wrongs of quartet singers but regrets that

---

<sup>79</sup> George Rooks interviewed by Kip Lornell, November 27, 1982, Memphis, Tennessee.

<sup>80</sup> Artison interview.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

the genre of music in which he grew up and still performs suffered from the seemingly hypocritical opinions of churchgoers.

Another reason that quartet popularity diminished was that the groups' originality began to disappear. Melvin Mosley stresses that the only way to succeed in music is to offer something no one else can; unfortunately, "[a] lot of the quartets tried to sing like other quartets. And that had a lot to do with the deterioration of the quartets because the originality began to fade."<sup>82</sup> Mosley also attributes the decline of the quartet genre's popularity to the "What have you done for me lately?" mindset of younger generation African Americans as yet another factor. He asserts that White audiences are more concerned with history than Blacks (especially youth) who are more interested in current hits and trends. Mosley suggests that the quartet tradition of recycling and rearranging songs in the public domain was not enough to keep the popular media-influenced African American youth engaged in the genre. Melvin Mosley offers one final interesting and novel reason for the decline of gospel quartet popularity in the 1960s, when he refers to the new and different things Black people were afforded the opportunity to do for the first time during that time period.

The thing was. . .there wasn't anything to do back then. People just go, they go to work, and they go to church. You know, basically Black people. We go to work, and we go to church. But it's an avenue so wide. . .it's so many different places for them to go. This is why the support is not there. It's not because they can't sing or they're not singing

---

<sup>82</sup> Mosley interview.

good. They just got so many other things they wanna do; they're not interested in gospel music.<sup>83</sup>

This perspective is one that does not exist in the current literature on African American gospel quartet culture; however, Mosley's thoughts are definitely relevant. When all African Americans could do was go to church and work, of course gospel singing would permeate the culture; however, when Blacks were given more freedom to participate in the larger society, the gospel genre was put on the backburner for new and more exciting activity. Black youth especially were perhaps drawn away from religious activity by popular culture. More than likely expected to continue the tradition of gospel quartet singing, African American youth were granted access to movies, television, video games, and other popular media not afforded to the older African American generations during their youth. These new opportunities offered young Black people more options for entertaining themselves than by simply rehearsing for and singing in quartet programs.

Although not as popular and highly demanded as during the height of its popularity from the late 1930s, to the early 1960s, the African American gospel quartet remains a staple in Memphis' gospel music network. Larger choirs and community groups such as Billy Rivers and the Angelic Voices of Faith and Darrel Petties and Strength in Praise are currently more prominent in the Memphis gospel scene; nevertheless, contemporary quartets (e.g. Commission) as well as traditional quartets (e.g. Spiritual Excitement, Spirit of Memphis) continue in the tradition of gospel quartet singing. Darryl Artison of Spiritual Excitement and Melvin Mosley of the Spirit of

---

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

Memphis both offered their assessments of gospel quartets today. Artison went directly to appearance, sharing his contempt for the indecent physical presentation of quartets today. He states:

When you go to God's house, you need to look your best. He gives you His best; He supplies you with resources to buy you a suit and tie, then that needs to be done. . .I know the Bible says come as you are, but also God has class, and when you enter into His house, you shouldn't come looking like a rag doll. I mean...your jeans and your t-shirts, man, that's for when you, when you're working. . .or you out on leisure time or something of that nature.<sup>84</sup>

Artison argues that the quartet should have enough decency and respect to come to church as presentable, if not more, than the layperson who dresses up to come here them sing. He believes wholeheartedly that the “quartet should be setting the example.”<sup>85</sup> On a more positive note, however, Artison suggests that quartet singers today are more knowledgeable about what they do and that they are attending more Sunday school and worship programs and seeking the Lord better than quartet members did in years past.

Melvin Mosley offers even more frustration concerning the African American gospel quartets of today. He suggests first that artists today try to advance too much stylistically and are moving away from the foundation of the quartet tradition. Mosley prides his group on keeping it basic because most people do not sing that way today. Similarly, Mosley asserts that he does not feel the same dedication to the craft and to God

---

<sup>84</sup> Artison interview.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

from quartets today compared to older groups. He believes younger groups just quit when things do not go as planned; however, he argues that groups should change their personnel to fit the mold and keep rolling.

Leon Moody adds another interesting (and again negative) opinion to the discussion of gospel quartet performance today:

Now, singing today, if you've got a good lead singer, that's it. See, the guitar and the drum, they gonna take up all the rest of the background. Those others are just back there and you can't hardly hear what they singing. I could get right up and sing with any group in Memphis; they ask you "What you sing?", "Tenor", "Okay just get up there and sing a little higher than the other fellow." Back in my day, you had to do it, you had to know the part you were going to sing. If you didn't know it, you couldn't do it.<sup>86</sup>

Moody suggests that the skill, the precision, and the quality of African American gospel quartet performances have declined (parallel to the genre's popularity itself) over the years. This implication of regression rather than progression in the gospel quartet genre appears to prevail in the discourse on the topic.

No matter the opinion of particular quartets, quartet singing (both sacred and secular), in general, has served as a universally respected pastime for African Americans, primarily males, for over a century now. Studying the African American gospel quartet genre in Memphis has been most ideal because Memphis is truly a gospel center; many gospel singers and writers (e.g. Aretha Franklin, W. H. Brewster, the Spirit of Memphis)

---

<sup>86</sup> Leon Moody interviewed by Kip Lornell, n.d., Memphis, Tennessee.

originated here in this city. Bonded by natural talent and a regional camaraderie, “black gospel quartet singers in Memphis have evolved into a highly complex, extended family by virtue of birth, marriage, geographic proximity, religious affiliation, and shared social values and status.”<sup>87</sup> Functioning more on fellowship than talent, this network—largely free of outside influence—operates in a spirit of cooperation and assistance.<sup>88</sup> Darryl Artison more or less sums up the attitude of the members of this network: “Have much as love as you possibly can that God gives you. . .be more friendly and try to help one another. . .going up the scale in the music business.”<sup>89</sup> He maintains that to be as helpful as possible to others is Godly and should be the goal of all members of the “family.”

Quartets and their individual members have constantly been judged based on their appearances, their singing, their performance styles, their lifestyles, and their effectiveness in ministry. While all opinions do not agree, Melvin Mosley of the Spirit of Memphis is confident that “as long as we are real, if we just touch one somebody in the audience when we sing—just one!—then our singing is not in vain.”<sup>90</sup>

---

<sup>87</sup> Lornell, “*Happy in the Service of the Lord*,” 79.

<sup>88</sup> Mosley interview.

<sup>89</sup> Artison interview.

<sup>90</sup> Mosley interview.

## Bibliography

- Lornell, Kip. "*Happy in the Service of the Lord*": *Afro-American Gospel Quartets in Memphis. Music in American Life*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988.
- Artison, Darryl. Interviewed by author, July 10, 2007, Memphis, Tennessee (tape in possession of author).
- Boyer, Horace C. *How Sweet the Sound: The Golden Age of Gospel*. Washington, D.C.: Elliott and Clark Publishing, 1995.
- Ford, Nelson. Interviewed by Kip Lornell, June 2, 1982, Memphis, Tennessee (All transcripts of interviews conducted by Kip Lornell can be found in Memphis Black Gospel Quartet Singers Oral History Collection, Series 26, Box/Volume 2 of 2, Mississippi Valley Collection, Ned R. McWherter Library, University of Memphis).
- "Gospel Academy salutes area talent." *Commercial Appeal*, 17 Mar. 1991, Sing His Glory, sec. G1.
- "Group Offers 'Hallelujah Holiday'." *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, 5 Dec. 1980, Showcase, sec. 8.
- Lornell, Christopher. "Happy in the Service of the Lord: Afro-American Gospel Quartets in Memphis, Tennessee." Ph.D. diss., Memphis State University, Dec. 1983.
- Moody, Leon. Interviewed by Kip Lornell, n.d., Memphis, Tennessee.
- Moore, Huddie. Interviewed by Kip Lornell, February 2, 1983, Memphis, Tennessee.
- Mosley, Melvin. Interviewed by author, July 17, 2007 (tape in possession of author).
- Readers, Julius. Interviewed by Kip Lornell, May 28, 1982, Memphis, Tennessee.

Rooks, George. Interviewed by Kip Lornell, November 27, 1982, Memphis, Tennessee.

Ruffin, Eli. Interviewed by Kip Lornell, March 2, 1981, Memphis, Tennessee.

Wade, Theo. Interviewed by Kip Lornell, October 1979, Memphis, Tennessee.

Winfield, Harry. Interviewed by Ray Allen, July 14, 1982, Memphis, Tennessee

(transcript in Memphis Black Gospel Quartet Singers Oral History Collection, Series 26, Box/Volume 2 of 2, Mississippi Valley Collection, Ned R. McWherter Library, University of Memphis).

Young, Alan. *Woke Me Up This Morning: Black Gospel Singers and the Gospel Life.*

*American Made Music Singers.* MS: Jackson University Press of Mississippi, 1997. <http://www.netlibrary.com/AccessProduct.aspx?ProductId=32670>

(accessed July 9, 2007).