

AT THE CORNER OF GLORY AVENUE AND HALLELUJAH STREET

White gospel singers: making a joyful noise unto the Lord

THEY HAVE COME from all over this corner of Texas. Most are probably from Houston, but a good many have driven in from Jasper and Conroe and Angleton. They are not dressed like the usual patrons of concerts at opulent Jones Hall, but it is clear they thought about what they were going to wear. Many of the men, especially the younger ones, sport bright colors—shirts, ties, handkerchiefs, an occasional suit in lime, plum, or raspberry. The women favor more subdued colors, most wear no makeup, and their below-the-knee hemlines signify modesty rather than high fashion; yet one scarcely thinks of them as plain: they have teased and piled and woven their uncut hair into marvelous creations. Their children are all scrubbed and bright, and the little boys have haircuts any grandparent would approve. They look like honest folk, and they are. Most of them love the Christian gospel they have heard proclaimed in Southern Baptist, Pentecostal, and other fundamentalist churches; all of them love gospel music. They have come for a big evening and they are going to get it, for tonight, right here in Jones Hall, where the Houston Grand Opera and Andres Segovia and Artur Schnabel perform, Mr. W. B. Nowlin of Fort Worth, Texas, is presenting a Battle of Songs, a marathon concert featuring just about every big-name group of white gospel singers you can think of.

Well, not every one of them. The Blackwood Brothers aren't here, and neither are Hovie Lister and the Statesmen, and everybody knows what those two groups have meant to gospel music. But just look at who is here: the Blue Ridge Quartet, Jim Hammill and the Rebels, the Dixie Echoes, Les Beasley and the Florida

Boys, Steve Sanders, Jerry Goff and the Thrashers, the Inspirations, the Four Galileans, Eva Mae Lefevre and all the Lefevres, J. D. Sumner and the Stamps Quartet, the Oak Ridge Boys, and the Happy Goodman Family. Now you'd have to be mighty particular not to be satisfied with that.

To many Americans, especially outside the South, the term "gospel music" conjures up images and sounds of Mahalia Jackson and the Edwin Hawkins Singers or, if they are more knowledgeable, of James Cleveland, Doris Akers, Crouch and the Disciples, and the Mighty Clouds of Joy. These folk gathering at Jones Hall would never deny the moving and magnificent contributions black singers and composers have made and are making to religious music, nor would they deny that the music of these black performers fully deserves the "gospel" label. Still, when they speak of gospel singing, they are referring to "white gospel," a music that is white in its origins and history and is sung almost exclusively by white performers for white audiences. There are signs that black and white gospel may be moving closer together, but the differences are deep, clear, and will not easily be erased. Some say the white singers don't have soul. Perhaps. But they are abundantly possessed of spirit, and their spirit is abroad in the land.

White gospel sprang from and still has deep roots in the fundamentalist South, but in the past two decades it has, like its musical cousin, Country and Western, developed a wide following throughout the United States and Canada. Now that Jesus has become one of the brightest new faces in popular music, and singing the Good News has become good business, some gospel artists envision for their music a sweeping popularity and influence comparable to blues, rock, or Country and Western. Others feel gospel music

belongs primarily to the church and should stay out of the secular arena, lest it be brought low by the snares of the world.

WHATEVER THE FUTURE of white gospel music, the concert tonight clearly reflects its past and present. The program opens with a prayer, reminding us that the Lord is in our midst. But the Lord loves a good time as well as anybody, and any notion we are in for a somber evening is quickly shattered as the Blue Ridge Quartet bounds onstage for its half-hour set. Like most of the younger men's groups, the Blue Riders' appearance is reminiscent of early Beatle Mod—gray Edwardian suits, dark plum shirts, and hair worn fairly long but neat. They have a good, strong, exuberant sound, and as they belt out, "I know, I know, there's no doubt about it, he lives in my heart and I'm gonna shout it," the audience claps and bounces in time and very nearly joins them in the shouting.

An early highlight of the evening is J. D. Sumner and the Stamps Quartet. Sumner is a legendary force in the development of white gospel and the granddaddy of gospel bass singers. Between songs, J. D. and the Stamps' miniature pianist, "Tarzan" Tony Brown, engage in some broad comedy banter. Then, with the quiet immodesty that has become a trademark ("when I started out singing at age eighteen, I had a great bass voice, and I've gotten better every year"), J. D. announces he is going to shower the audience with some real bass singing. Gospel music fans love good bass singing and groups with an exceptional bass like the Blackwood's London Parris or the Statesmen's "Big Chief" Wetherington will seldom fail to feature him in a number that allows him to exhibit the richness of his voice and then, like a juggler who finally

gets all twelve hoops spinning while balancing on a slack wire, to hit and hold his lowest note.

Sumner is billed as "the World's Lowest Bass Singer," and, as he leans his long thin torso into the microphone, there is genuine excitement in the audience. The first few dips and runs bring smiles and scattered applause. Then, almost eating the mike, Sumner heads into the depths. As he moves down a note or two, Tarzan lowers his piano stool an inch and the audience laughs nervously. Finally, as the little pianist covers his eyes, Mr. J. D. Sumner hits a double low C. For those who may not recognize the magnitude of this feat, a double low C is only three notes off the bottom of the piano. One can almost see his vocal cords going whap . . . whap . . . whap. As he glides back up the scale, the audience bursts into laughter and applause at the wonder of it all. I feel the man next to me expresses it pretty well when he says, "If you had a voice like that, you just couldn't ask for anything else."

The next two groups epitomize the old and the new in gospel music. The Lefevre family has been a fixture in the field since 1921, when Alphus and his brother Urias and their sisters Maude and Omega began singing in churches and schools to raise money to send the boys to Bible college. The Lefevres sing what Eva Mae (Urias's wife and the First Lady of Gospel Music) describes as "really the square, old-time gospel singing, without any of the new sounds." They shun fancy costumes; Eva Mae wears a modest evening gown and the men wear black suits and white shirts, with matching pink ties and handkerchiefs. The only signs of extravagance are the hand-tooled leather guitar straps bearing their first names. In keeping with their appearance, the Lefevres avoid contrived body movements. They just stand up there and play their guitars and sing while Eva Mae makes the stage jump with the heavy, even beat and the colorful rills and runs that are the hallmark of gospel piano. They are bucking a trend, they know it, and the crowd loves them.

In sharp contrast, the Oak Ridge Boys feature "the New Sound in Gospel Music" and set the standard by which many of the younger groups measure themselves. They are one of the few groups to use drums—drummer Mark Ellerbee, complete with drooping moustache and tinted avi-

ator glasses, admits that "it really freaks people out to see a gospel drummer"—but it is virtually certain others will follow their lead. The Oaks are superb showmen. After a spirited rendering of their current hits and new releases, they wind up the set with a good-humored parody of leading gospel groups, including some on the program tonight. The delighted crowd instantly picks up every nuance of voice, expression, and gesture, indicating this concert is but one in a long string they have attended.

THE DEFINITIVE HISTORY of white gospel music has yet to be written, but several developments have been of unquestioned importance. In the first half of the nineteenth century, singing-school teachers from New England traveled throughout the South and what was then the West, teaching literally millions of Southern and frontier people to read music and to sing well in harmony. The singing schools improved church choirs and congregational singing, but they also enriched the cultural life of the whole community as the new singing enthusiasts organized themselves into what they called "conventions." These conventions, whose membership was usually drawn from a single community or county, met each weekend, ordinarily on Sunday afternoon. Once a month they might meet with a convention from the next county, and in months with a fifth Sunday, they might go clear over to the third county to share in what came to be, and in some places remains, a marvelous Southern institution: "Singing-all-day-and-dinner-on-the-grounds."

After the morning service and a huge dinner served on long tables lined up under the shade trees on the side of the church away from the cemetery, various members of the assembly would take their turn at leading selections from soft-cover songbooks with titles like *The Timbrel of Zion*, *Tidings of Joy*, and *Crowning Hymns (Number Ten)*. Most of the singing at these early convention meetings was congregational, but, in time, some of the better singers began to form small groups to present "specials." Because their music usually had four parts, the most natural group was the quartet. Quartet singing gained enthusiastic acceptance, and alert music publishers such as James D. Vaughn, Virgil O. Stamps, and

J. R. Baxter seized upon the idea of using quartets to publicize the endless parade of new songbooks their companies were producing. On weekends, the quartets traveled out to conventions and churches, sang the new songs, then sold the songbooks that contained them. By this means, white gospel music became the music of a folk.

As the popularity of gospel music grew, quartets proliferated and began to take themselves seriously. Eventually, in the Thirties and Forties, a bold few became full-time professionals and tried to piece together a living out of personal appearances, music sales, and local radio programs. For most groups, these were lean years. J. D. Sumner recalls that in his first year with the Sunny South Quartet he lost his car, his furniture, and his credit rating as the group tried to live on \$25 a week split six ways among the four singers, the pianist, and the car. Sumner admits he was considered "a downright lazy person" by his family. He explains his perseverance in simple words that seem to express the sentiments of all the artists who struggled through these days—"I just loved to sing."

In the Fifties, the Blackwood Brothers and Hovie Lister and the Statesmen paved the way for white gospel's present success when they expanded their tour schedule beyond the South and proved their kind of music would draw good crowds all over the nation. Today no gospel quartet can claim it has really arrived until it spends most of the year traveling the length and breadth of the nation in a huge bus with the group's name emblazoned along its side. The big buses—outfitted with individual sleeping quarters, lounge, eating areas, and other amenities—provide safe, dependable, flexible transportation, and to veteran performers like James Blackwood and Jake Hess, who remember the days of Plymouth coupes packed with performers, equipment, records, and songbooks, they are marvels of comfort. Still, nothing can remove all the strain involved in traveling over 100,000 miles a year to play as many as 300 concerts, with nightly rides of 300 to 800 miles the rule rather than the exception.

SOME GROUPS OCCASIONALLY stay on the road for as long as six weeks, but most try to return home

two or three times a month to tape local and syndicated television shows, attend to the record and sheet music businesses many of them operate, and reestablish contact with their families. Unquestionably, the tour puts families to a stiff test. Roger McDuff, who has traveled with the Stamps, the Blackwood Brothers, and his own group, the McDuff Brothers, found the strain too great—"The Lord doesn't mean for a man to be gone from his family 390 days a year. It's just no way to live." McDuff has found a comfortable existence by singing occasional dates and operating a wholesale record business out of his music store, the House of McDuff, in Pasadena, a suburb of Houston. He admits there are times, however, when he would like nothing better than to "get on the bus again." "You can't imagine the effect it has on people," McDuff says, "when you pull into a parking lot in a big bus with your name on it. It's prestige plus. It's class."

Like all performers, gospel singers do enjoy the recognition and acclaim they receive from their fans. Still, they readily acknowledge McDuff's point that family life suffers when the husband and father is gone three-fourths of the time, not simply because of his absence, but also because of the temptations that seem to befall even gospel singers. Though a large percentage of the singers conform to the strict personal morality of fundamentalist Christianity, one occasionally hears dark allusions to gospel groupies and performers who "drink vodka all night and sing in church the next morning."

I have no reason to doubt there is such sin in the camp, but these forces of darkness have quite a struggle with the forces of light and innocence. While I discussed their church affiliations and evangelistic work with the Inspirations, a group of fresh-faced young men not long out of Swain County (North Carolina) High School, Tommy Atwood of the Florida Boys walked through the room and asked archly, "You boys got anything to drink?" As he left, hugely pleased with his joke, the boys turned crimson and looked as if they wished to be swallowed by some Biblical earthquake. Finally, one of them shook his head ruefully and said, "As soon as I saw him come in, I knew Tommy was going to do something like that. Mr. Martin, we don't *drink*."

Not any of us." When I related the incident to an acquaintance who knows many of the performers, he laughed and said, "That Tommy's a regular cutup. He's liable to say anything. But, you know, they tell me he's one of the most spiritual fellows around."

Whatever the incidence of hypocrisy, it can safely be reported that Satan does not as yet enjoy anything like complete dominion on the gospel music circuit.

The tours feed and are fed by the other facets of the business. Fans want to see the artists who have made their favorite records, and they want to buy the records of the artists they have seen. A standard feature of virtually every white gospel concert is the "record table" in the lobby or foyer, where the various groups sell their records, sheet music, and soft-cover songbooks. Somewhat surprisingly, fans do not regard this as unwarranted huckstering but as a service owed them by the performers. As a consequence, concert sales are not just a gimmick for picking up a little loose change, but a basic means of distributing gospel records. On an evening when an audience has been especially receptive to a group's performance, record sales may run into thousands of dollars.

AS WITH OTHER FORMS of popular music, the role of radio is immense. At the end of 1970, an estimated 150 to 200 North American stations featured white gospel music and were enjoying good ratings in major markets, especially in areas where Country and Western music is popular. In Houston, the Big Bright Happy Sound of Colorful Gospel Music emanates from KFMK, an affiliate of the Crawford Broadcasting Company, the nation's largest gospel chain, with nine stations in major urban centers, including Chicago, Detroit, and Buffalo.

KFMK is managed by Hardy Brundage, who is also the disc jockey on the nightly *Dixie Gospel Caravan*. A pleasant and transparently sincere young man, Brundage was once a traveling evangelist for the Assemblies of God and still preaches frequently on the weekends. He broadcasts the *Caravan* from a small studio in his home, a fact he often mentions as he strives to establish a bond of friendly trust with his listeners, whom



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he addresses as "neighbor." Brundage usually begins the show with the faster moving songs and slows down the pace as the evening progresses. If the mood seems right, he will sometimes softly embellish the words of the song, as during a recent number by Nancy Harmon and the Victory Voices:

I've placed my trust in Jesus...

"You know, neighbor, I've placed all of my trust in Jesus. I've turned it all over to him."

I'm so glad...

"Yes, praise God, neighbor. I'm so glad. Listen to the words and let it bless you tonight. Sing it, Sister Nancy."

I've got a better place to go.

"When I leave this old world, I'll look up to Jesus and be able to say that I've got a better place to go. And you're going to be there with me, neighbor. Praise the Lord."

This open and genuinely pious approach has been highly successful. Most of the people at the concert in Jones Hall tonight are here because Hardy Brundage invited them. He has had some difficulty lining up sponsors for the *Caravan*—"when you tell people you are in gospel music, right away they peg you as a loser"—but once they sign, they usually stay signed. They have learned that Hardy's neighbors will patronize them, not only because they appreciate their sponsorship of the program but also because when Hardy tells you that the Bonner Motor Company is "Christian owned and operated, under the direction of the Rev. Mickey Bonner," and that he has personally toured their building and had them work on his car, it is difficult indeed not to believe that the Rev. Mr. Bonner and his Christian mechanics can handle all your auto-repair needs and will give you honest work for an honest dollar.

This neighborly, down-home spirit permeates the white gospel scene. Instead of trying to distance themselves from their fans, as performers in some fields seem to do, gospel singers take pains to make it clear they are "just folks," from Bible-preaching churches and Bible-believing homes like those of their fans. Duane Allen, lead singer for the Oak Ridge Boys, recalls how he felt when he first heard about Jesus in a little Baptist church in Taylorville, Texas, and Buck Rambo of the Singing Rambos speaks of

chopping firewood on washday in the hills of Kentucky. Buck's wife, Dottie, whose rich contralto voice and songwriting abilities have established her as a top gospel star, tells of a tour of Vietnam during which "we cooked for the boys, cut their hair, and looked at pictures of their kids. We just tried to be a good example of the things we sing about."

BEFORE CONCERTS and during intermission, performers mingle easily with the crowds at the record stands, signing autographs, selling records, and just visiting. Buddy Thrasher, one of the best at making folks feel welcome, is at his best tonight during intermission: "Evening there, neighbor. How're you feeling? Let me shake your hand. I'm Buddy Thrasher. Good to have you out tonight." Buddy has a lot of friends from other visits. A middle-aged lady who shows signs of having worked hard all her life pumps his hand happily: "Hi, Buddy. I had to work it special at my job to get to come tonight, but I got my tickets six weeks ago, so I wasn't going to miss it." Buddy is real proud she could work it out. A giggly, gangling girl with a mouthful of braces tells him the pictures she took of him last time turned out real good. Buddy is surprised he didn't break the camera, but he makes her promise to bring some of the pictures the next time the Thrashers are in town.

It is hard for fans to hold people like Duane Allen and the Rambos and Buddy Thrasher in much awe. It is not so hard to come to love them.

AT A TIME when everything not nailed down seems about to come loose and when men living in larger and larger crowds grow more and more lonely, it is hardly surprising that an essentially simple music sung by unpretentious and uncomplicated performers should be enjoying broad success. The core of white gospel's fans is still church people who have grown up in the South. Its early successes in the North came in industrial centers like Detroit and Cleveland and Chicago, where thousands of Southerners had moved to find work. But a Southern heritage, while it helps, is not required for the enjoyment of this music.

There are folk all over America—

some say they are a majority—who share a background of economic strain, hard work, church twice on Sunday, prayer meeting on Wednesday night, and a close-knit family circle in which Daddy sang bass and Mama sang tenor. Some are farmers and workingmen; others are engineers, attorneys, physicians, and college professors—even at meetings of learned academic societies it is not terribly difficult to find three or four good old boys who know all the words to "Gathering Flowers for the Master's Bouquet" and will sing them at the drop of a funeral-home fan. For all these, gospel music offers a chance to cling to their origins, or at least to give them an affectionate stroke.

The appeal of gospel singing lies in both the music and the words. The tunes and harmonies are eminently singable, but they could not survive were it not for the words, with their distinct version of history and the gospel. History—at least one's own personal history—is seen as a three-stage progression. The first stage is remembered in songs that "Talk About the Good Times" when children learned of life and God "At Mother's Knee" and on the hard wooden pews in "The Old Country Church." Work, family, neighbors, church—all found their place in a world in harmony. Now, in the second stage, the harmony has turned to discord. "Mama's Teaching Angels How to Sing," "They've Torn the Old Country Church Down," and the world seems to have slipped from God's pocket. The present is the low point in the panorama of history, but, "Thanks to Calvary," the believer is not discouraged. He knows the darkness of the valley is temporary, like that on "The Night Before Easter," and he can shout with the ransomed, "Thank God I'm Free—He Looked Beyond My Faults and Saw My Need." He knows "The King Is Coming" soon to lead history into its final stage, and he longs for the day when he can "Shake Hands with Mother Again," build his mansion "Next Door to Jesus," "On the Corner of Glory Avenue and Hallelujah Street," and spend eternity "Sheltered in the Arms of God."

The fact that the words of the songs play such an important role has created some tension within the ranks of white gospel artists. Some groups feel the true purpose of singing the gospel is ministry, and regard no per-

formance as complete until they have taken time out from their singing to share their faith with the audience. Rosie Rozelle and the Searchers decided they would gauge their success in 1971 not by income or concert bookings but by the number of people who "accepted Christ as their personal savior" after hearing them sing. It looks like a banner year. "We set our goal at one soul a week," Rozelle says, "and by the middle of February, we were already eight months ahead." Others, however, regard their performance primarily as entertainment, with any spiritual effect it might have coming as a bonus. J. D. Sumner observes: "I don't preach to a person that's paid \$3.00 to hear me sing. The songs themselves are enough to make people realize they need God in their lives."

THE ENTERTAINMENT-ORIENTED groups, who tend to affect the flashier clothes and bolder sounds, have undoubtedly helped open the gospel field to a wider range of artistic expression than the four-men-and-a-piano that characterized it for years. The Four Galileans, a fast-rising Mexican-American group, have recently recorded an album with a mariachi band; and a new instrumental release, *The Jericho Brass*, features gospel standards as someone imagines Herb Alpert might play them in the Little Brown Church in Tijuana. The hottest album on the gospel charts in 1970 was a comedy record by singer-humorist Wendy Bagwell, and the biggest concert attraction of 1971 was the *Gospel Festival U.S.A.*, an elaborate production that culminated in the presentation of *The Three Nails*, a thirty-minute musical drama of the Crucifixion as seen through the eyes of a hardware dealer.

These departures from the old paths have drawn mixed reactions from the fans. Most seem to welcome the new sounds, but others dismiss them as "frambanging music" and insist that "the tried and true will be here when the fads are gone." Happily, the two viewpoints coexist rather peacefully, and some groups seem to enjoy the best of both worlds. The Rambos, for example, have a strong commercial sound and applaud the polish and innovations of the entertainment-oriented groups, but both Buck and Dottie take time in every concert to "give testimony," and

nineteen-year-old Reba always sings at least one song in which she tries to "put across the message of Calvary in a way that young people can understand it."

WHEN THE ROLL IS CALLED up yonder, however, perhaps no group will prove to have combined entertainment and ministry more successfully than the Happy Goodman Family of Madisonville, Kentucky. Their annual income from concerts, television, and sales of records and music is estimated at \$250,000, hardly astronomical among entertainers but still at or near the top in a field in which even headliner performers seldom earn as much as \$25,000 a year. They could doubtless make more were it not for the fact that Happy Howard Goodman is pastor of the Life Temple Pentecostal Church of God in America in Madisonville, and insists on being at home on the weekends to look after his flock. The Goodmans are the final act at the concert tonight. As they wait their turn backstage, Howard bounces a baby on his great lap and holds court with a semicircle of Houston residents who once belonged to his church in Madisonville. His wife Vestel, a round but radiant woman with a braided hairdo that adds at least a foot to her height, has spent most of the evening talking to a young woman who sought her out for spiritual advice. This is not unusual for Vestel. Onstage at a Grammy Awards presentation, she told old friend Johnny Cash, "Johnny, you ought to get down on your knees and thank God for the talent He's given you. If you ever dedicate yourself fully to the Lord, you call me up, even if it's in the middle of the night, because I want to be the first one to shout." As Vestel tells it, "A big old tear popped into Johnny's eye and he turned to his wife and said, 'June, honey, did you hear that? I believe that's the sweetest thing anybody ever said to me.'"

I am curious as to why Vestel spends her life singing. With as lovely a smile as I ever hope to see, she says, "Because I just love to. I love to sing about the Lord, because He's real. Music has a way of soothing people in troubled times. You're a Bible student, aren't you, Bill? You remember how Saul asked David to sing for him when he was vexed in

his soul. Well, God gave music to lift the hearts of humanity. For me, singing is a calling, and God grant that I always use my singing for Him. Does that make sense? Don't put it down if it doesn't, because I'm not that good at saying what I mean. Listen, it looks like we're fixing to go on now, but I sure enjoyed talking with you. Lord bless you, Bill. I hope to see you again." I hope to see you again too, Vestel.

AS THE HAPPY GOODMAN FAMILY takes the stage, Howard's brother, Sam, deftly milks the audience: "Are you glad to have Howard and Sister Vestel in Houston? Are you glad to see Rusty and Bobby? Are you glad to see Vickie and Ricky?" They are, and the excitement backstage is almost as great, as members of the other groups crowd into the wings—"Scuse me, neighbor, I didn't mean to step on you"—to watch and listen. At the close of their set, the Goodmans win a standing ovation with a song that tells of the Grand Reunion with the saints "Just Inside the Eastern Gate" of heaven. They decide to sing it again and Vestel asks the audience to "remain standing and clap your hands with us, would you? Don't anybody leave." Howard is in tears, Sam declares he has never felt a sweeter spirit in a gospel singing, and Rusty is shaking hands with people in the front row. As they repeat the song, Howard signals one of the Florida Boys onstage to sing with them, and even some of those in the wings join in. (The bass part is easy; mostly *do's* and *fa's*.) At this moment, I am almost certain I know where I would go to church if I ever moved to Madisonville, Kentucky. I might not "put my letter in," but I would visit every chance I got.

A few minutes later, the concert closes as it had opened, with a prayer, led by Hardy Brundage. At the MC's suggestion, members of the audience shake hands with each other and say, "God bless you, neighbor," to those around them, then file out singing "God Be With You Till We Meet Again." As they pass through the plush foyer, an older gentleman captures the small but, in these parts, significant wonder gospel music has worked on this audience. "Just look!" he marvels. "You can't tell a Baptist from a Methodist." □