

The Gospel According to Music

“Gospel music mends the broken heart, raises the bowed-down head, and gives hope to the weary traveler. Indeed, each time gospel serves a function it will surely create a ‘Happy Day’.”

– Rev. C.L. Franklin

“I wrote to give them something to lift them out of that Depression. They could sing at church but the singing had no life, no spirit...We intended gospel to strike a happy medium for the downtrodden. This music lifted people out of the muck and mire of poverty and loneliness, of being broke, and gave them some kind of hope anyway. Make it anything but good news, it ceases to be gospel.”

– Thomas Dorsey, recognized father of Gospel Music

It was 1954. The sweltering heat of an Alabama summer bounced off the brick walls inside an old abandoned warehouse in Fairfax, a town of about 5,000 people in the east central part of the state, just a football’s throw from the Georgia border. In a small enclave of the building, a half-dozen teenagers were gathered to refine their skills at Tunk, a card game akin to knock rummy.

On this Sunday morning, 17-year-old Henry Dunn, a piano player and choir member, had skipped services at Rehobeth Baptist Church to join his friends who were on their own private missions.

“We’d get together every-so-often just to have some fun,” Dunn recalled. But on this particular day, Dunn admits that he “shoulda been at church.”

One person brought the cards and most of the young men, as was a custom for youths of that era – toted weapons of defense, usually knives, but sometimes guns. When they got together for social activities like cards, there was an unwritten rule that the weapons were placed on a table apart from the game – in clear site – so there would be no “hidden agendas.”

So just like a scene from out of the old West, everyone who was playing cards evicted their pockets of the temptations. Dunn took out the pistol that he had legally purchased, and placed it on the table. The gambling began.

“It was just for fun and we’d throw in a quarter or so, and the pot never got real big,” Dunn said.

They played for about an hour. A few youths dropped out of the game, and walked over to the weapons table and began examining the hardware. One picked up Dunn’s pistol and pretended to play Russian Roulette.

“I told him to stop,” Dunn said. “But he kept playing with my gun, and after a while it began to irritate me. Several times I told him to stop, but he didn’t listen. Then I got angry. I walked over to the table and said, ‘Okay, you want to play Russian Roulette? Well, I’ll show you.’ “

Dunn picked up his gun, whirled the chamber around, pointed the weapon at the youth’s leg and pulled the trigger.

The sudden bang shocked everyone. The bullet had indeed hit his friend's leg.

"We were all scared," Dunn said. "We called the sheriff. We all knew it was an accident, but still, it scared us."

An ambulance took the wounded young man to a nearby hospital, and a sheriff's car took Dunn to the police station.

"And when we were driving to the station," Dunn confessed, "They went right by my church. I was embarrassed and ashamed, but right there is where I realized that God was sending me a message. From that point on, He changed my life."

The wounded youth recovered, and Dunn was not charged but said, "I realized that God had other plans for me. I had to dedicate my life to Him for getting me through this incident. I had to become 'reborn'."

Recently graduated from Lanier High School, in Lanett, Dunn left Alabama, and his life indeed took a distinct turn.

"Fortunately, I found Jesus," Dunn recalled, "I had a revival, a change of heart. I finally listened to the preacher, Rev. Crandall. And now I am able to give back to the Lord with music."

Amen!

Today, Dunn, a radio ~~broadcaster who has spun Gospel Music~~ songs for more than 50 years on local stations, is music minister at Mount Lebanon Baptist Church, and lives his passion for God and music as a disciple of Gospel Music in Akron and Northeast Ohio. Far removed from the evenings of listening as a youth to rhythm and blues on Nashville's 50,000-watt radio station WLAC, Dunn is well tuned to this area's Gospel music, its people and its culture. He is also an accomplished musician and singer, and has played, sung, promoted and broadcast Gospel Music in this area since he left Alabama.

In 1994, Dunn was elected to the Broadcaster's Hall of Fame.

Indeed, the years Dunn has spent perched behind a microphone, coupled with his hands-on approach to musical worship, give him a unique perspective about the history, growth and popularity of Gospel music in the area. He also has organized, sung with and played for many groups including the *Dynamic Dundaleers*, an all-female Gospel Group he began in the 1960s—consisting of Vivian Johnson, Annie Bracey, Barbara Bracey, Maggie Bracey, Suzie Johnson and Dunn. And if anyone has spent more time than Dunn carrying the Gospel Music banner, then let him or her filch the title of Mr. Gospel Music in Akron away from him.

Yet, while Dunn offers an exclusive viewpoint about Gospel Music in Akron, he is the first to admit that he is not bigger than the music that he loves. "There are many gospel singers, groups and musicians in this area," he said. "We may not have the quantity that they have in Chicago or Detroit, but we have the quality!"

Let's have another, "*Amen!*"

Dunn was referring to the growth and popularity of Gospel Music in his beloved community. He and many other aficionados of this style have several common threads that weave together their passion. Those common threads include those deep Southern roots; jazz and blues; a parent or parents who themselves embraced the music; a love of God and an addiction to combining those two and sharing that love with others.

Akron's Charles "Chuck" Myricks is one of those people.

While he didn't get as ominous a start as Dunn, Myricks directs *Divine Hope*, a Gospel group he founded in 1984 at the Arlington Church of God where he is minister of finance and development. And if Dunn gives Akron Gospel Music an excellent historical perspective, then Myricks and *Divine Hope* give it prominence and credibility.

"Chuck has an amazing gift," said Eric Benjamin, former resident conductor of the Akron Symphony Orchestra and now conductor of the Tuscarawas Philharmonic. "He is a very gifted musician. I am particularly impressed with the ease that he can create music. It is very canny."

Benjamin was first introduced to Myricks in the early 90s when the two men were asked to corroborate with the late conductor maestro Alan Balter, in developing the first Gospel Meets Symphony performance of the Akron Symphony, today in its 11th successful year.

"When I met him, I had never listened to Gospel Music," Benjamin said. "And when I thought of Gospel Music, I thought of 'White Gospel' -- three chords and melodies that were a combination of country-and-western music and barbershop. I was horrified," he admits, "until I met Chuck."

Educated in the arts and classical music, and growing up in Vermont, it was understandable how Benjamin would perceive Gospel Music.

"But what Chuck plays and what other similar groups play is a religious experience. It is so dynamic, genuine and filled with love and enthusiasm. You cannot help but be moved by it."

Indeed Gospel Music -- primarily music with African-American roots -- moves the spirit.

It doesn't make a difference if the gathering is two or 200. Gospel music is hot -- not only hot from a popularity standpoint, but hot physically. Even in the winter, Gospel music needs ceiling fans gently sifting the air from beam to beam, to let an occasional slight gust of wind drop downward to the church pews, sparsely filled with Sunday worshippers.

Gospel Music needs some vehement "Amen's!" It needs an organ, piano or keyboard player who can sit behind the instrument and pound out chords and notes until his fingers bleed. It needs sweat. It needs motion. It needs passion. It needs SOUL!

"Gospel Music helps me and so many other people," said Myricks. "In it we are transported to a deeper place. The power of the music is used by the Lord to do things to people and sometimes the Spirit intercedes. Music speaks to us and to God."

Music and God spoke to Myricks in 1977. That's when he said he turned to Gospel Music. "I just felt a calling to it," he said.

He actually is oversimplifying things. The calling he refers to was probably more like a reoccurring subliminal sermon generating from the lips of his mother, Rev. Cleo Myricks-Graham, and his father, Charles Myricks, Sr.; translated at the Robert Street Church of God (now the Arlington Church of God); sifted at Akron's Garfield High School and fully comprehended at Anderson University, Anderson, Indiana, "a cornfield with lights," Chuck laughed.

"I guess you could say I was born into (Gospel) and became involved in its music almost immediately."

The reality was that Myricks was a legacy. His influences were his mother, a minister of more than 40 years, and his late father. But others who guided him along the way were his grandfather, Rev. Robert Fowler, a former pastor at Robert Street; his grandmother, Susie Jordan-Fowler, a Georgia girl; the nationally renowned Gospel Music singer Bill Gaither, also a graduate of Anderson, and Dr. Robert Reardon, a college professor.

"Dr. Reardon told me that he didn't want to see me someday in a Volkswagen beside the road," Chuck laughed again.

Chuck eschewed his mythical VW, heeded the words of Dr. Reardon and pursued his love of God and music. At Anderson, he formed a group called *Fruit of the Spirit*. The *Fruit* actually was the seed for bigger and better things for him. He soon took his degree and was off to the business world where he landed a job IBM.

He learned the ins and outs of business, and how a big giant corporation operates, but he never got too far from his love of music – Gospel Music. Then while on a mission from IBM, he received a call from Jerry Weimer, who ran the business operations for singer Bill Gaither, also a trustee at Anderson and a frequent visitor to the college campus. Gaither had introduced Weimer to Myricks.

"Jerry called me one day and said he had a perfect fit for me," said Myricks. "He knew of my love of Gospel Music and he knew that I was learning about business in general. Then, he made my dreams come true. He wanted me to become vice president and general manager of his own recording label, *Word*."

In the six years he worked with Weimer, and the Nashville-based *Word*, Myricks was the producer on 10 CDs, and executive producer on more than 30, not to mention five as a performer on his own CDs.

Yet, while he loved music, his passion for God and a church were even stronger. That's when he returned to his Akron roots and, in 1984, formed his current choir, and called it *Divine Hope*.

Myricks took *Divine Hope* to another level. They have cut four CDs, and are working on another one. They call the Arlington Church of God, 539 S. Arlington St., their home, but in reality, every church where they have sung is their home. And those homes have been located on three continents – North America, Europe and Africa.

Today, *Divine Hope*, with many of the original performers, is a dynamic, 12-member Gospel Choir, with so much power and energy that you might call them a weapon of mass devotion. The current members include soprano Valerie Brinson; altos Carla Davis and Robin Parker; contralto Leslie Barnes; tenor Sam Gordon; drummer Chris Davis; bass Chuck Myricks; bass guitar Clint Walton; lead guitar Anthony Watters, trombone/harmonica Victor Head; saxophone Stan Davis and sound technician Theodis Shepard.

But Gospel Music in Akron – or anywhere for that matter – is more than Henry Dunn, his Alabama roots and his radio showcase. It's more than Chuck Myricks, his Georgia roots, his recent courtship with symphonic music and *Divine Hope*. Gospel Music is sung in many churches in the area, but true Gospel Music, with the blues and jazz roots, is sung primarily in African-American churches.

Almost every denomination has a choir or a "group" that sings the gospel. Then there are a few non-denominational groups who also have that common thread.

One of those groups is called *Carolyn & Company*, founded by Carolyn Hooks, one of seven children of Dr. William K. Hawkins, Sr., pastor emeritus of the Greater Bethel Baptist Church, 404 S. Arlington Street.

"Years ago, Dr. Hawkins initiated and sponsored a thanksgiving of Gospel Music and called it 'Joy Night'," said Myricks.

Dr. Hawkins had an impression on Myricks, Dunn and many Akron area worshippers, singers and musicians of Gospel Music. But the one who likely most benefited from Dr. Hawkins' love of God and Music was his daughter, Carolyn.

"Carolyn, I believe, was the only one of the children who really was just as passionate about Gospel Music as her father," said Dunn. "She always sang in the church choir, but really didn't get together a formal choir until 1993."

By that time, Carolyn Hawkins, a graduate of Buchtel High School, already had appeared on the Gene Carroll Show with host Don Webster; recorded a live album (mixed at the Bill Rowe Studios in Barberton) with the Gospelairees at Bethel, but was eager to get back to singing at churches.

"I sent a letter out to all the churches in the area looking for volunteers to form a choir for a one-time performance to honor my father and the 'Joy Night' he started years ago," Carolyn said. "It was so successful that the next year, many of the same people came back to me and wanted me to do it again. I didn't realize how popular it would be."

In 1994, *Carolyn & Company* officially became a choir. *The Company* asked Dunn to help sponsor and promote the group.

"Brother Henry has forgotten more about Gospel Music than I will ever know," said Hooks. "We used to listen to his broadcasts on the radio when I was younger. Back then, they had a female announcer named Arzella Smart. But Brother Dunn and his broadcasts were the catalyst to get me into an organized choir."

"*The Company*," as she refers to her choir, originally consisted of 53 members – including a keyboard player, drums, bass and lead guitar. She estimates that that *The Company* has sung in almost every church in the Akron area, and also churches in Cleveland and Canton.

Hooks said her early influences were Beverly Crocker, Dottie Peoples and Aretha Franklin. "I'd listen to Aretha 24/7," she said. "I loved her style, her enthusiasm, but most of all, I respected her for her Gospel background and singing in her parents' church in Detroit."

Ironically, Dunn, who has been the music minister at Mount Lebanon Baptist Church, 180 Edwards Ave., since 1971, also emulated some popular entertainers in his formative years. They included Louis Jordan, Roy Brown and Fats Domino.

"I tried to play boogie-woogie style on an upright piano in the living room," Dunn said. "Then my parents saw how good I was and moved the piano out on the front porch. Then on Friday and Saturday nights I'd play for the neighbors and we'd sell fish sandwiches. It was a lot of fun."

Gospel Music in Akron, just like the rest of the nation, has grown and changed from the days in Fairfax, Ala., when Dunn played piano on his porch. It has changed since Chuck Myricks was a college student at Anderson College, and it has changed since Carolyn Hooks performed "Help me make it through the night," on the Gene Carroll show.

It has changed since Dunn formed his *Dynamic Dundaleers* in 1968.

So, how has it changed? What's the future look like?

"It's still going to be popular with the older generation," said Dunn. "But just like in the past, they will pass it along to the next generation, and they will do just like we did – they will adapt it to their own style. Yes, they've even got Rap Gospel now. But that's the kids' interpretation of it."

“But you know, if it gets them to church and praisin’ the Lord. What’s wrong with that?”

Let me hear a big, “*Amen!*”

##