

MISSOURI  
MASTERS  
AND  
THEIR TRADITIONAL ARTS

**“How I Got Over:”  
African-American Gospel Music  
in the Missouri Bootheel**

*Featuring soloist Mildred Whitehorn*



Gospel soloist Mildred Whitehorn sings at home in Kennett, Missouri, December 5, 1994. Photograph by Dana Everts-Boehm.

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**Missouri Folk Arts Program**  
**of the Missouri Arts Council**  
**University of Missouri-Columbia**  
**S p r i n g, 1 9 9 5**



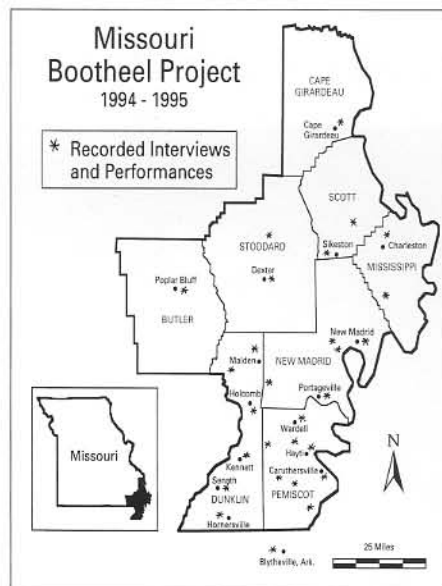
MISSOURI FOLK ARTS PROGRAM

# Introduction

This essay emerged from the Bootheel Underserved Arts Communities Project, which was co-sponsored by the Missouri Arts Council, the Missouri Folk Arts Program and the State Historical Society of Missouri at the University of Missouri-Columbia. Extensive fieldwork undertaken in 1994 documented, among other things, a rich vein of African American gospel music in this region. Jean Crandall, a graduate student in the Folk Studies Program at Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green, participated as a fieldworker for this project. Crandall interviewed a number of black gospel musicians and taped performances at choir rehearsals, church services, and fellowship gatherings. One of the gospel singers she interviewed, Mildred Whitehorn, was subsequently chosen to participate as a master artist in Missouri's Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program. Dana Everts-Boehm, director of the Missouri Folk Arts Program, continued working with Ms. Whitehorn, recording additional interviews and performances. Co-authored by Crandall and Everts-Boehm, this essay explores the phenomenon of African American gospel in the Bootheel, with a special focus on soloist Mildred Whitehorn.

## The African-American Presence in the Bootheel

The region of southeastern Missouri known as the Bootheel covers an area of approximately two thousand square miles (see map). It is a unique area of the state culturally as well as geographically. Settlers began arriving in the Bootheel in the early 1800s, attracted by the giant timber and fertile soil of the flatlands. The disastrous New Madrid earthquake of 1811 converted much of this flatland into swamp, temporarily halting the clearing of land. In 1907 the Little River Drainage System was constructed to drain the swamps (Brassieur: 1995). The original bottom-



Map of the Missouri Bootheel. Asterisks show the location of interviews and performances taped during the Bootheel arts survey.

land forest soon gave way to vast expanses of flat, rich soil ideal for farming, and the Bootheel joined the rest of the Mississippi Delta as a major cotton producer.

Land owners employed the exploitative system of sharecropping prevalent at that time throughout the Mississippi Delta. Many African-Americans in the region today trace their roots back to families that migrated into the area to work in farm labor. Ray Brassieur, project coordinator for the Bootheel Arts and Heritage Survey, writes that "Black farmworkers involved in this early twentieth century Bootheel population boom shared the sorts of African-American experiences — southern agrarian background, hard work, poverty, migration and homelessness — from which great musical creativity was then emerging" (Brassieur: 1995).

Although farming continues to be an important part of the Bootheel economy to this day, increased mechanization on the large farms made sharecropping obsolete by the 1940s. The majority of the local African American population now work in local industries, retail, or in other professions.

## Gospel Music in the African-American Church

In the Bootheel and elsewhere, the African-American church is an institutional stronghold for black spiritual, cultural and artistic expression. In addition to its primary religious function, the church plays myriad roles in the



One of five parallel floodway ditches of the Little River Drainage System, the largest in the United States. Photograph by David Whitman.

community. It is a center for socializing, a forum for the exchange of ideas, a place to cultivate family and community ties, and a force for social justice. Since slavery, the church has been perhaps *the* most powerful institution in the black community, out of which have emerged many of the nation's greatest leaders and fighters for political and social reform.

Gospel music — that riveting, soaring sound heard every Sunday in African-American churches across the nation — has helped carry the message of the black cultural experience far beyond church doors. Its impact is felt in virtually all forms of American popular music today: jazz, blues, rhythm and blues, rock and roll, country music, and even American art music.

The roots of African-American gospel music stretch back to Africa. Wrenched from their ancestral lands, African slaves brought to the New World were forced to abandon many cultural practices, arts, and languages. In spite of such fierce deprivation, slaves managed to retain and creatively reshape as much of their cultural heritage as they possibly could under hostile surveillance. Music continued to be an integral part of daily life involving all members of the community, young and old. Work-songs, spirituals, "shouts" and field hollers provided both a cathartic expressive outlet and a subversive code for criticizing white society, communicating about clandestine meetings or aiding in escapes (Blassingame 1979: 139).

Even the widespread conversion of African slaves to Christianity must be understood in the light of their retention of core African cultural traits. Styles of worship and music that the slaves developed in their "praise houses" reflected their uniquely African understanding of Christianity. Ethnomusicologist Portia Maultsby observes that "Concepts of Christianity that were similar to African religions allowed the slave to accept the Christian God on an intellectual level that differed from that of their counterparts.

The religious music created in praise houses reflected the religious beliefs, aesthetic values and musical standards of slaves" (Maultsby 1982:5).

Out of this blend of African artistic sensibility and Christianity came the genre of African-American religious folk song known as the spiritual. Combining Anglo-American melodic and harmonic form with such African elements as strong rhythms accompanied by bodily movements, gapped scales, improvised texts and call and response pattern, the spiritual became a unique musical form (Oliver 1986: 338). Passed down for generations in the oral tradition, spirituals are often referred to as "the only literature of American slavery" (Seroff 1991: 4). Blassingame writes: "Songs of sorrow and hope, of agony and joy, of resignation and rebellion, the spirituals were the unique creations of the black slaves. Often combining secular and sacred themes, narrating personal experiences, and uplifting the disconsolate, the spirituals frequently served as accompaniments to labor or dealt with the prosaic details of life" (Blassingame 1979: 137, 139). While still sung today, spirituals have been largely eclipsed by their descendant, gospel music, which "from the

1930s on displaced the spirituals as the most important single body of black religious music" (Levine 1977: 174).

Retaining many of the characteristics of spirituals, black gospel expanded on them to create a new genre. Gospel song texts both resemble and differ from the texts of spirituals. Levine writes "In both, God is an immediate, intimate, living presence. Like the spirituals, gospel songs are songs of hope and affirmation. As important as these similarities are, they are overshadowed by the differences. The overriding thrust of the gospel songs is otherworldly, the concept of heaven remains firmly in the future. Jesus rather than the Hebrew Children dominates the gospel songs, and not the warrior Jesus of the spirituals but a benevolent spirit who promises His children peace and justice in the hereafter" (Levine 1977: 175).

African-American gospel music appears to have originated in the ecstatic or "Holiness" churches (Maultsby 1982: 13, Levine 1977: 180). The Holiness movement began at the end of the nineteenth century, when former black Baptist preachers founded the first of the Pentecostal churches throughout the South. The ecstatic or charismatic



The pastor of the Homestown Church of God in Christ, Elder Reginald Grant, lays hands on church goer Jasmine Whitehorn during the service on March 26, 1995. Photograph by Dana Everts-Boehm.



churches, including Pentecostal, Church of God in Christ, Church of Christ Sanctified and Church of God Holiness among others, quickly gained converts. Today the annual convocation of the Church of God in Christ alone attracts approximately 75,000 members from all over the world (interview with Mildred Whitehorn, 12/5/94).

Levine writes that "While many churches within the black community sought respectability by turning their backs on the past, banning the shout and adopting more sedate hymns, the Holiness churches constituted a revitalization movement with their emphasis upon healing, gifts of prophecy, speaking in tongues, spirit possession, and religious dance" (Levine 1977: 180). Music is a key element in conveying an emotionally charged spiritual experience in these churches. The Sanctified and Holiness churches cite Psalm 150 as a biblical affirmation of their emphasis on music:

Praise him with the sound of the trumpet; praise him with the psaltery and harp. Praise him with the timbrel and dance; praise him with stringed instruments and organs. Praise him with the loud cymbals; praise him with the high sounding cymbals. Let everything that hath breath praise the Lord!



Member of the Homestown Church of God in Christ accompanies the choir with tambourine during church service on March 26, 1995. Photograph by Dana Everts-Boehm.

Evidence suggests that the timbrel or tambourine ringed with cymbals was the first instrument used in black Pentecostal churches, and they are still common (Oliver 1986:197). Other instruments commonly employed in black Pentecostal churches today include piano, organ, electric and bass guitar, drums and even brass instruments. The African-American Pentecostal and Holiness Churches have consistently shown an openness to expanding their musical idiom, borrowing freely from secular music (Levine 1977: 180).

The term "gospel music" was first coined by Thomas A. Dorsey in Chicago in the 1930s. Following the lead of Methodist minister Charles A. Tindley, credited as being the originator of composed gospel (Maultsby 1982:13), Dorsey popularized a gospel style that incorporated melodies, harmonies and rhythms from blues, ragtime and jazz. Partly because of this openness to incorporating secular influences, gospel music was initially resisted by denominations outside the Holiness movement. But by the 1930s black Baptists and Methodists began to incorporate gospel into their services, and by the 1970s even black Catholic churches were spawning gospel choirs (Maultsby 1982:14).

Horace Clarence Boyer identifies two major categories of gospel music: "traditional," exemplified by such artists as Mahalia Jackson, Thomas Dorsey, the Pilgrim Travelers and Shirley Caesar; and "contemporary," represented by Andrae Crouch, Edwin Hawkins and the Mighty Clouds of Joy, among others (Boyer 1985:129). Currently even more varieties of gospel are emerging, including gospel rap.

Traditional gospel is characterized by diatonic melodies and the frequent use of interior cadences. Contemporary gospel tends towards more key changes and the elaboration of differing cadential patterns (Boyer 1985:130). Traditional gospel tends to use tonic chords, relative minors and seventh chords. Extended chords such as ninths, elevenths, and thirteenth can

also be found in contemporary gospel (Boyer 1985:141-2).

Boyer lists three major themes present in gospel song texts: scriptural quotes or paraphrases, praise/adoration of the Savior, and supplication. Gospel singers themselves use the terms "prayer song" or "praise song" in their introductions. Singers may also categorize songs as "fast" or "slow." Bishop Benjamin Armour, Sr. of the Monument of Deliverance Church in Hayti, Missouri, uses these terms in reference to songs commonly sung by his congregation. Fast songs are generally in 4/4 or 2/4 time, and slow songs are in 12/8, in which beats one, four, seven and ten receive the major pulses (Boyer 1985:133). The regular meters encourage participation because it is easy to clap and move to them.

## Gospel in the Bootheel

Folklorist John W. Roberts wrote in 1992 that "In the early days of the tradition, gospel music was dominated by solo singers and quartets who were well-known in their areas and, in some cases, nationally. Today, few gospel singers perform solo. And gospel quartets have become almost non-existent in African-American communities" (Roberts 1992: 6, see also Seroff 1991: 6). If what he says is true, the Bootheel is an unusually traditional enclave where older styles of gospel have mysteriously persisted. Choirs, quartets and soloists all thrive in the region, with repertoires spanning the spectrum from traditional to contemporary.

## Quartets

Quartet singing has a long and rich tradition in African-American culture. Descriptions of early black quartets are found in traveler's reports such as a diary written by Swedish visitor Fredrika Bremer, who passed through South Carolina in 1850. Bremer wrote, "I heard the negroes singing. Their hymns sung in quartette were glorious" (Humphrey 1993:113). Nicknamed

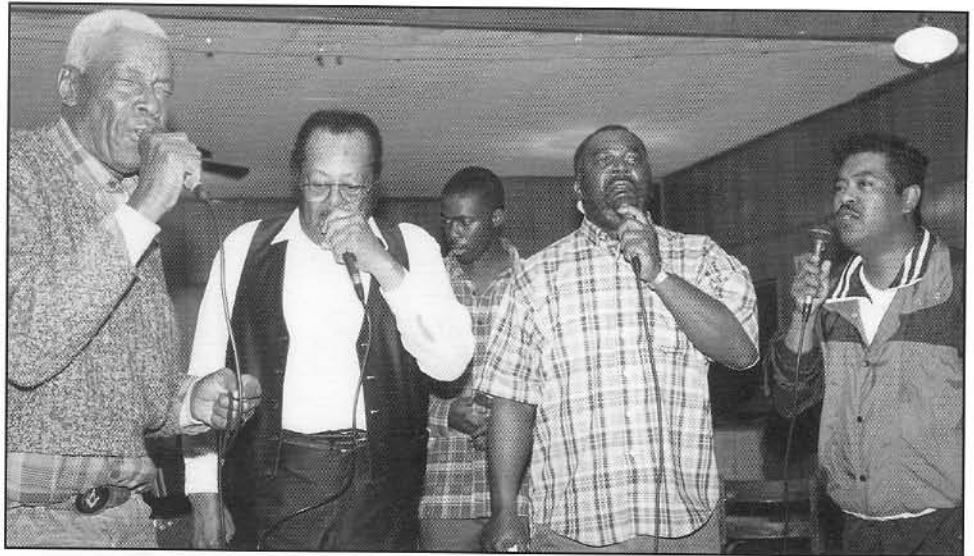
"the black national pastime of the early 1900s" (Seroff 1991: 5), black quartets were soon discovered by recording companies. Columbia recorded the Standard Quartette in 1895 and the Victor Talking Machine Company followed suit in 1902 with a recording of "Down on the Old Camp Ground" by the Dinwiddie Colored Quartet. Blues writer Mark A. Humphrey postulates that the ubiquitous radio significantly boosted the popularity of African-American quartets during the Depression (Humphrey 1993: 136-7).

Record companies released a large number of quartet recordings after World War II, establishing black quartets as commercially viable. Major post-war groups include The Soul Stirrers, The Sensational Nightingales, and the Dixie Hummingbirds. Early quartets often sang acapella, "relying on vocal dynamics, close harmony and improvised counterpoint for variety" (Oliver 1986: 215).

As noted above, gospel quartets have been disappearing over the past few decades. Quartets continue to be popular in the Bootheel, however, especially among certain denominations. Mildred Whitehorn comments:

Some churches like quartet music better than choirs. The Baptist Church here in Kennett, they love quartets. The African Methodists, they like them too. You could put one of the best choirs in the world up, and you could take a quartet that's just put together off the streets here, and they'd like that quartet! They *love* quartets!

Local quartets are characterized by the following musical traits: four part



Gospel quartet the Wings of Heaven practicing at Mercy Seat Baptist church in Charleston on March 17, 1994. Left to right: Frank Ware, Reverend Billy R. Williams, Willie Petty, Jr. (background), Reverend Leroy Reed, George DeMeyers. Photograph by Jean Crandall.

harmony consisting of alto, tenor, baritone and bass, separation of lead vocalist and background singers (although overlapping may occur), 2/4 or 4/4/ meter, polyrhythms, call and response patterns, use of blue notes and melismas, and clarity in harmonies.

With a performing career spanning four decades, the Wandering Five of Portageville is one of the best known and best loved quartets in the region. Founded in 1949, the oldest active original members of the group are Reverend Willie Eadie and Jesse Newson. Over the years the group has included Nathaniel Wigfall, Robert Newson, Jesse Newson, Robert Bennett, Dave Fuller, James Duke, Reverend Billy Ray Williams, Lee Swinger (known as the father of the group), Timmy Tucker, Willie Allen, Al Turner, "Wash" Wigfall, Joe Williams, Curtis Hayes, James Davis, Emanuel Prachter and Richard Austin. The Wandering Five sing in four part harmony, separating the lead vocalist and the background singers. Their style is reminiscent of post World War II groups such as the Dixie Hummingbirds and the Soul Stirrers. The Wandering Five continue to broadcast weekly from radio station KMIS in Portageville.

Jesse Newson, guitarist and singer for the Wandering Five since 1958, was born in Tate County, Mississippi in

1928. His parents were sharecroppers, and Jesse had eleven half siblings and "ten or twelve" full brothers and sisters. Newson moved to the Bootheel in 1956 at the age of twenty-eight. He expresses his love of singing in poetic terms:

You know, singing is the Lord's way. You can praise God through singing. The minister, he carries the word, but God, He wants you to praise Him for what He done for you! A lot of people don't think singing means nothing, but singing means a lot. Everything in the world praises God. Birds, when you hear them around. Bushes, you see them waving and going on. They're praising, saying they've got a life, praising God!

Newson began playing the guitar at the age of eight or nine, and the first kind of music he played was the blues. In spite of the sharp dichotomy drawn between blues and gospel in the African American community — blues being considered "the devil's music" and gospel "the Lord's music" — (see Levine 1977: 179), gospel music has a historic kinship with blues. Both genres developed in the early twentieth century, sharing a common musical legacy in spirituals and ring shouts. Shared musical traits include blue notes, melismatic singing, and extemporization. Newson's guitar playing for the Wandering Five features recognizably blues elements such as bends to and from notes, blues riffs, and rhythmic



The Wandering Five 45 rpm record jacket, 1972. (Back row left to right) Robert Bennett, Jesse Newson, Willie Edie, Robert Newson; (middle) Jesse Newson, Jr.; (bottom left to right) Dave Fuller, Booker Combs.



patterns typical of blues music. His playing would sound as natural in a blues band as it does in a gospel quartet. This is true of gospel music in general. The father of gospel music himself, Thomas Dorsey, was a popular blues artist for years before devoting his life to gospel. Dorsey explained, "Blues is a part of me, the way I play the piano, the way I write" (Humphrey 1993:134).

The Echoes of Joy, a woman's a cappella quartet from Howardville, is a sort of descendent of the Wandering Five. The manager of the group, Juanita Wigfall, is the daughter of Nathaniel Wigfall, one of the early members of the Wandering Five. Juanita's two teenage daughters, Beatrice and Laquanda, and friends Natalia Blackshure and Melinda Reed make up the Echoes of Joy. Beatrice, Laquanda and Natalia began singing together as children, calling themselves "The Gospel Three" and later, "The Junior Echoes." As the girls developed into mature, experienced singers, Juanita Wigfall and Melinda Reed joined them, and the group became known as The Echoes of Joy. (It is not unusual, by the way, for a quartet to include more than four members).

The Echoes of Joy describe their style of quartet singing as "contemporary" and, indeed, their repertoire features contemporary as well as traditional quartet songs, including a number of their own compositions. "We try to bring our music up to the times," explains Juanita. While the group shares many characteristics of older, more traditional quartets, their contemporary edge can be attributed, in part, to their exposure to diverse gospel styles. Ethnomusicologist Joyce Jackson explains that "the concept of harmony in quartet performance has expanded over the years, and is now only limited by the performer's musical experience" (Jackson 1988: 198).

Traveling to churches for weekly performances, the Echoes of Joy add to their repertoire by listening to other local quartets and choirs, and by select-

ing favorite gospel numbers from commercial recordings. The Echoes of Joy expect a spirited response from their audiences. "Don't sit there and look at me like a zombie!" Juanita laughs. "I want to see people move around a little bit!"

Reverend Flem Bronner, pastor of St. John Missionary Baptist Church in Sikeston, is a member of the nationally known quartet, The Bronner Brothers. The Bronner Brothers have toured extensively and had a number one gospel hit in the 1970's entitled "Holding on to God's Unchanging Hand." Many other exceptional quartets are active in the region, including the Wings of Heaven from Charleston. The appearance of new groups such as the Christian Brotherhood, a quartet composed of high school students, is a sign that that the Bootheel may well be experiencing a "mild resurgence of gospel quartets," as Brassieur suggests (Brassieur 1995).

### Church and Community Choirs

One of the first acts of cultural empowerment undertaken by the black community in the wake of emancipation was to formally establish their own churches. Today African American

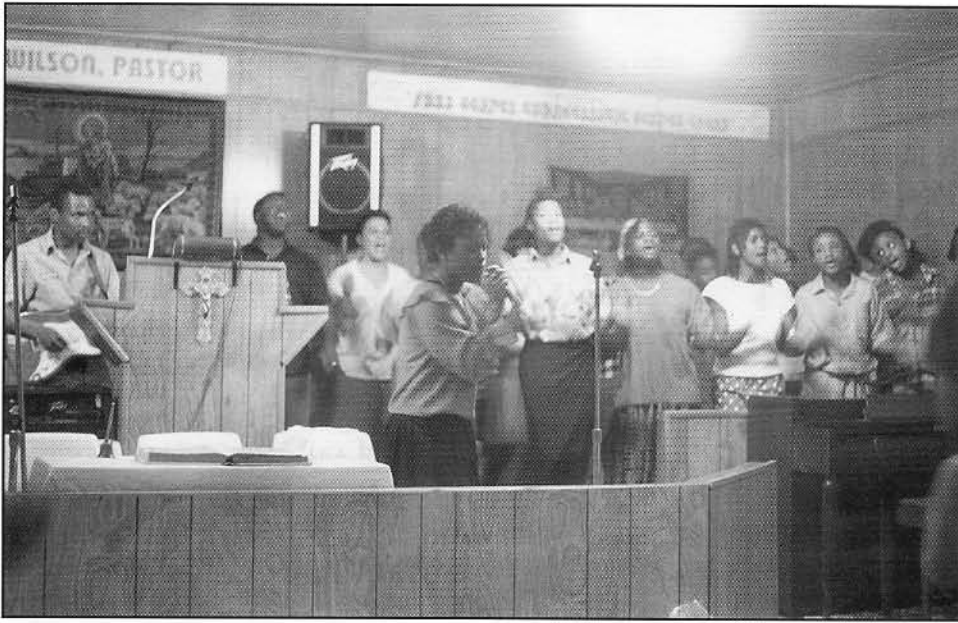
churches in the Bootheel include many denominations and non-denominational groups: Methodist, African Methodist, Roman Catholic, Baptist, Holiness, Pentecostal, Church of God in Christ, Jehovah's Witness, and others. The Pentecostal and Holiness traditions have a particularly strong presence in the Bootheel.

Most of these churches have gospel choirs. Choirs are by far the most prevalent form of African American music gospel in churches today (Roberts 1992: 6). Ranging from small church choirs to larger district or jurisdictional choirs, these singing groups infuse their churches with a joyous, participatory atmosphere of worship. Choir repertoires include a broad spectrum of material including gospel and denominational hymns, spirituals and upbeat, contemporary songs (Brassieur 1995). Choirs provide musical training for adults and children alike, nurturing local talent within a supportive and nurturing environment.

Children's choirs with names like "The Sunbeams" or "The Sunshine Band" offer opportunities for church goers aged two to twelve to assimilate the performance styles and aesthetics of the African-American gospel tradition. The children take turns as solo-



The Echoes of Joy rehearsing at home in Howardville, March 17, 1994. Left to right: Juanita Wigfall, Melinda Reed, LaQuanda Wigfall, and Natalia Blackshure. Photograph by Jim Nelson.



Guitarist Michael Covington (far left) accompanied the Full Gospel Evangelistic Church Mixed Choir in Hayti Heights, March 15, 1994. Photograph by Jerome Stueart.

ists, learning how to incorporate movements such as clapping and swaying into their singing. Choir directors urge the children to project their voices and to sing with conviction. In some churches, thirteen year olds graduate to the "Puritans," where they remain until, at twenty-one, they can finally join the adult choir.

Directors painstakingly work with their choirs, training them to aspire to the finer points of gospel performance. At a rehearsal on March 19, 1994 at the North 6th Street Church of God in Christ in Hayti, for example, the choir director lectured the group on the art of improvisation, among other things. Improvisation is the act of spontaneously altering rehearsed songs according to sudden inspiration. Impressive enough for a soloist, *group* improvisation seems nothing short of miraculous. Guest soloist Mildred Whitehorn recalls a moment when an entire choir improvised on the spot:

See that's kind of what the spirit does, it kind of moves on everybody and then it just happens. Our national Sunshine Band, it happened like that with them. I've never seen the power of God come on *children* like that. When the power of God came in, we hadn't even practiced some of the singing parts they did, it just *happened!*

In addition to spreading a spiritual message of hope and renewal, adult choirs fulfill a number of important functions. Popular choirs recruit and attract new members to the congregation (Brassieur 1995). Brassieur notes that "special Sunday afternoon music programs featuring African American gospel performances by choirs and quartets . . . occur nearly every Sunday at churches scattered through the region." Many of these music programs are "fellowship gatherings," such as "The Gos-

pel Deliverance Music Fest" on March 14, 1994, at the Monument of Deliverance Church in Hayti. Such fellowship events encourage ministerial alliances and friendships among diverse church groups, strengthening bonds in the African American community. Instrumentalists who accompany the choirs are in great demand. Electric guitar, electric bass, organ or electric keyboard and drums or a drum synthesizer are commonly employed as accompaniment to the singing. "The Traveling Sons of Hayti" are one of a number of groups that accompany a wide variety of gospel groups and styles at church services and special events throughout the area. Some of the region's most outstanding gospel guitarists include Michael Covington of Portageville, James Dukes of Sikeston, and Dennis Armour of Hayti, all of whom incorporate stunning blues riffs into their playing.

### Soloists

Solo performers have a fascinating history dating back to the turn of the century, when popular black evangelists traveling through the South made a name for themselves as singers as well as preachers. The highly charismatic solo performer Sister Rosetta Tharpe



The choir of the Homestown Church of God in Christ makes a dramatic entrance during the service on March 26, 1995. Photograph by Dana Everts-Boehm.



achieved great popularity in the 1930's and 40's both as a gospel singer and a blues singer. Undoubtedly the most highly acclaimed gospel soloist of all time is Mahalia Jackson, whose powerful, evocative voice made her an inspiration to millions of Americans of all colors and creeds. Contemporary gospel soloists of note include Shirley Caesar and Yolanda Adams.

Mildred Whitehorn, a cosmetologist living in Kennett, is well known throughout the Bootheel and beyond as an exceptional gospel soloist. Frequently asked to perform locally for church and community events, she and her daughter Jasmine have also performed twice for the annual National Black Mayor's Conference (in New York City and Memphis, Tennessee), the annual Convocation for the Church of God in Christ also in Memphis (which is televised), and at gospel contests and singing events throughout the state and country. In the fall of 1994, Mildred and Jasmine Whitehorn were selected to participate in the Missouri Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program. Through this program, Mildred is guiding her youngest daughter, Jasmine, in the art of solo gospel singing.

Born on December 11, 1949 in Hayti, Mildred Pulliam Whitehorn is the granddaughter of sharecroppers. She recalls that her family had to be extraordinarily resilient to survive hard times:

They tell us a lot of things, you know. Things you don't even want to tell, cause it was *serious*. They told us about when they was sharecropping, how bad things was, you know. It was worse, *worse* than slavery. All they did was work. Went to the man's store to buy whatever they could buy to eat, and *all* of the work they did, he took every *dime* of the money. *Every* penny. So when you went to pay him, his books was a lot greater than what you really owed. My mother could have been one of the worst people in the world because of the way she had to grow up. But because God blessed her she grew and became a woman, you know, I mean a real woman. She had twelve kids and raised her sister's six, that was eighteen of us in one house.



Mildred and Jasmine Whitehorn at home in Kennett, August, 1994. Photograph by Carole Patterson.

Mildred's father was a welder, a blacksmith, and the pastor of two churches. She says of him,

My father worked himself to *death*. He went to church, worked, I mean he was a good father, a *good* father. He owned his own business. This house in front of me, he built that house with his own hands. That's where I grew up.

Mildred's family was musical, especially on her father's side:

They played the blues and sang the blues. I got one uncle that's a blues musician. Now my father was a preacher; he took us to church and that's where I learned to sing gospel. My father could *sing*. I mean he would always sing a song before he would preach. My father used to sing, "There'll be a Fire One Day That the Firemen Can't Put Out." People used to love to hear him sing that. My mother hasn't been a real outgoing person as far as singing, but anyway in church she would sing a song.

Mildred remembers singing her first solo in church at the age of six:

I grew up singing with the Sunshine Band. The first time I sung a solo by myself I was six years old. And the people shouted and shouted and I wanted to sing from *then* on! And I *did*!

In her early twenties, Mildred embarked on a singing career with STAX records in Memphis as a rhythm and blues vocalist with the stage name of Veda Brown. She toured extensively for

about ten years, achieving a number one single, "Short Stopping," and shared top billing on one tour with soul singer Johnny Taylor. She comments:

When I started, I went to the record company with the intention to do gospel. But I listened to the worldly music — I wasn't saved at the time — and I liked it. It wasn't hard for them to persuade me to do it. And after I started doing it, I enjoyed it. But I was never comfortable with my lifestyle. I always had this little voice saying to me, "You know you shouldn't be doing this." And I'm *glad* that I was like that. I didn't forget where I come from, and it was easy for me to go back.

Since her return to singing exclusively gospel, Mildred Whitehorn has continued to be active as a soloist and choir president. Her choir has temporarily disbanded, but she reports that in its heyday:

We were just putting a choir together for our church and we ended up going a lot of different places, singing, contests, you know. Oh, God, once our choir was over a hundred voices! It was the first time in this area we ever had a choir like that, too. We did a contest for BET (Black Entertainment Television) one time and our choir won!

When she sings gospel, Mildred says that she "can really feel it . . . and when I finish I know the Lord is pleased with what I've done." Mildred's repertoire leans towards traditional. She



doesn't like contemporary gospel as much because she believes that the emphasis on rhythm and production enhancement detracts from what, to her, is the essence of gospel. She comments,

When it's too contemporary, it doesn't have that gospel feel, that spiritual feel. It loses that. You could be in the juke joint — that's what it sounds like! It makes me want to dance instead of rejoice and thank God for what He is to me.

Mildred Whitehorn has a special reverence for Mahalia Jackson, incorporating many of her songs into her repertoire. She admires Mahalia Jackson not only for her music, but because she stood up for what she believed in:

When I was younger I sang because I was taught to sing and I liked singing in church, you know. But as I grew older, then I realized that my singing could be a benefit to my people. When I sing Mahalia Jackson my mind just goes back to...you know, she used to sing at all these big functions and the March on Washington. I associate her with the movement for freedom. In my heart I always wanted to sing the song that would help, you know, that would ease the pain. That would make you see there's a better day coming.

Mildred tries to instill this message in her youngest daughter Jasmine, who at the age of thirteen has both a remarkably powerful voice and a desire to sing professionally. Mildred says:

I don't want her to wait to get as old as I was before I realized that your singing can be *important*, I mean it can be a *help*. The song "How I Got Over," okay? I shall *never*, I shall *never* forget the things that I've heard. And I missed a lot of it, I was on the tail end of it. But I shall *never* forget "How I Made it Over." And that's why I like to sing *that* particular song. "My soul look back in wonder, how I made it over!" I made it because my mother and father made it. *They* made it because *their* parents made it. And I'll *never* forget. Because there's a possibility things could get that bad again.

The following is the text of Mahalia Jackson's praise song, "How I Got Over," the way that Mildred Whitehorn sang it for "Tuesdays at the Capital" in Jefferson City on April 25, 1995. Everytime she sings this song she varies it depending on the context, so this

version is considerably different from our recordings of her singing it at church in Homestown, and at the Arts Conference in Kansas City.

*How I got over  
(and I want you to clap for me!)*

*How I got over  
You know my soul look back in wonder,  
How I made it over!*

*Ummmm, soon as I can see Jesus  
Man that died for me  
Man that bled and suffered  
Hung on Calvary.*

*And I'm gonna thank heaven for how He  
brought me  
And I'm gonna thank God for how He taught me  
Oh, thank my God how He kept me  
I'm gonna thank Him 'cause He never left me.*

*And I'm gonna thank heaven for old time  
religion,  
And I'm gonna thank God for givin' me a  
vision.*

*Lord, we're gonna join the heavenly choir  
We're gonna sing, Lord, and never get tired!*

*And I'm gonna sing somewhere round your  
altar,  
And I'm gonna shout all my troubles over!  
Lord, I've got to thank you, thank you for being  
So good to me.*

*Hmmmm, all, all night long  
You kept your angels watching over me  
And you told your angels this mornin'  
You told your angels, Lord, this mornin'*

*You said, "Touch her in My name!"  
You said, "Touch her in My name!"*

*And I rose, I rose this mornin'  
With the blood, the blood of the anointed  
In my vein!*

*And Lord I feel, I feel like running!  
Lord I just feel, I feel like running!  
Lord you know I feel, feel like running!  
Lord God I just feel, I feel like running!*

*And I want to thank you for being so,  
Lord, you've been so good to me! Oh yeah!*

The invariably enthusiastic response to her spirited rendition of this inspirational praise song attests to her power as a gospel soloist. Mildred has an exceptional command of her rich voice, using dynamics, vocal colorings, and techniques such as swoops, vibrato, and bends to great effect.

Mildred's three daughters, Kenota, Kellie and Jasmine, are all talented musicians in the gospel tradition. Kenota has been accompanying choirs and soloists on the keyboard in her home



Mildred sings "How I got Over" in Jefferson City, April 25, 1995. Photograph by Dana Everts-Boehm.

church since she was a teenager. Kellie and Jasmine sing with their friend Michelle Robinson in a gospel trio, and both sisters also perform as soloists. While Kellie admits to being somewhat shy about singing in public, Jasmine is as undaunted facing audiences in New York City, Memphis, Kansas City and Wichita as she is stepping up to the microphone in her own church. Jasmine's vocal phrasing and projection are extremely effective for someone her age. She is obviously learning a lot about using different colorings in her vocalization to create tension and drama.

When asked by the audience at the program in Jefferson City how she got started as a singer, Jasmine replied:

Well I guess what interested me was, when I was small, I would always see my mom go up to sing in church. I guess just seeing my mom sing made me want to. And my sister, she would play the piano and I would sing in the Sunshine Band.

Mildred fondly recalls Jasmine's debut as a church soloist:

You all won't believe this but Jasmine has been singing solo in church since she was *two* years old! She was too short for the people to see her, so my father would hold her in his arms while she was singing. That's the God's heaven's truth!

Mildred has been coaching Jasmine in her singing fairly intensively over the



Kellie and Jasmine Whitehorn in front of their house in Kennett, March, 1994. Photograph by Jean Crandall.

past year, during their participation in the Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program. Jasmine leans towards a more contemporary repertoire, citing Yolanda Adams as her favorite soloist. Jasmine and Kellie note that young people their age prefer a more "upbeat" sound. Yet the sisters agree with their mother that gospel, even contemporary gospel, should not be too showy. Kellie and Jasmine contrast singers in the Bootheel region with some they've encountered elsewhere:

Jasmine: People in other areas, they ad lib a little too much. I mean they put too much into it and that takes out of the song. They think too much of themselves when they sing.

Kellie: Especially when you're singing in church, you should try to glorify God, not to make yourself look good.

Fellow trio member Michelle Robinson of Homestown has been playing back-up keyboard for Mildred and Jasmine's apprenticeship lessons, and she also accompanied them for their performance in Jefferson City. Michelle plays keyboard for Sunday services at Homestown's Church of God in Christ. The Whitehorn family began attending this church a couple of years ago. Michelle has relished the opportunity to play for them:

They helped me a lot, you know, because when they first came I really wasn't used to playing for solos, I was just playing the shout music. I didn't know who Jasmine Whitehorn was. And this little girl, she

was standing up and she sung, and that was the first time I heard it and I was like, "Oh, man!" I couldn't just sit there, so I was just playing behind her. I started learning how they sound.

Fully aware of Jasmine's enormous talent, Mildred wants to provide her with training and guidance without pushing her too hard. She looks forward to the time when Jasmine will take over center stage:

Nowadays we travel together *all* the time. But she sings more than I do. I'm gettin' old. She's retiring me!

In spite of a variety of interests in sports and other school activities, Jasmine remains committed to her singing. Having just turned thirteen, she has graduated out of the "Sunshine Band"



Michelle Robinson plays keyboard for Jasmine Whitehorn during Homestown Church of God in Christ service, March 26, 1995. Photograph by Dana Everts-Boehm.

into the youth choir, "The Puritans." Asked at the program in Jefferson City if she plans to pursue a singing career, Jasmine responded, "That's what I've always dreamed to do."

## African American Gospel Music and Community

As suggested above, gospel music in the Bootheel fulfills a number of important functions for individuals, families and the larger community. On the personal level, it is a way to praise God within a loving, supportive environment and to visualize a brighter future, a way out of hard times. Participation in choirs, gospel fellowships, convocations and other singing events is an av-



Jasmine sings "The Battle is Not Yours" at the Homestown Church of God in Christ service, March 26, 1995. Photograph by Dana Everts-Boehm.

enue for young local talent to achieve personal goals and recognition. Gospel music also serves to strengthen family bonds, as the core groups for choirs often consist of relatives. Extended families may even incorporate gospel music as part of their annual family reunions. Mildred Whitehorn and her husband James host one such reunion — including her many siblings, cousins and their families — every June in Kennett. She describes it:

We got property over on Vandeventer Street, and some of my family live on the property. We have our platform set up and chairs out and other people in the community come over, and we have gospel singing over there in the yard. It's our family that's doing the singing and performing, but it's other people coming over to listen to us. We have us a keyboard man, my sister's husband, he's good! I got one brother that can play the keyboard, he's a preacher now, he's an elder. We just eat and sing, so you're lookin' at about, what, three hours out there just enjoying each other, you know.

But the heart of African American gospel music lies in its unfailing ability to communicate a spiritual message of joy, hope, and salvation. Powerful lyrics wedded to compelling music, delivered with passion and conviction, combine to make gospel music an irresistible force. The song lyrics illustrate African American Christian religious traditions in their emphasis of an intimate, *personal* relationship with Jesus: "Jesus is on the main line, tell Him what you want!" and "To the left, to the right, over me, under me, *He's* keeping me alive!" The lyrics further reflect the belief that the very act of praising God is beneficial: "Everytime I think about Jesus, it makes me feel good, good, good!" At the Gospel Deliverance Music Fest, music director Kathy Bell repeatedly quoted the popular lyrics, "When the praises go up, the blessings come down!"

The participatory nature of African American gospel music contributes to its extraordinary impact, and is apparent whenever and wherever gospel is performed. The entire congregation or audience is encouraged, indeed, *expected*, to sing, move, and express themselves. "I want you to clap your hands for me!" Mildred Whitehorn told her predominantly white audience in Jefferson City. "You can go on and get up!" a woman urged at the Monument of Deliverance's Gospel Music Fest, "You've got to get it out somehow!"

Through its profound sincerity and participatory nature, gospel music is, in essence, a medium for transformation and spiritual transcendence. Blurring

the line between performer and audience, gospel music pulls everyone present into a shared experience that transforms sorrow into joy, despair into hope, isolation into communion. African American gospel music is moreover a powerful means of expressing and maintaining cultural identity. When African Americans sing gospel music in their churches, they are reaffirming ties to family, community, cultural heritage and the legacy of their ancestors.

African American gospel music is alive and thriving in the Missouri Bootheel. Whether performed by quartets, soloists, choirs, Baptists, Pentecostals, or African Methodists, the black gospel tradition flourishing in this region constitutes an artistic, cultural treasure of which the entire state should be proud.

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## FIELD RECORDINGS:

By Jean Crandall:

1. Interview with Jesse Newson, 3/17/94, Lilbourn, MO
2. Interview with Mildred and James Whitehorn, 3/15/94, Kennett, MO
3. Interview with Kellie and Jasmine Whitehorn, 3/18/94, Kennett, MO
4. Interview with Trinita Peel, 3/15/94, Hayti, MO
5. Choir rehearsal at North 6th Street Church of God in Christ, 3/19/94, Hayti, MO
6. Choir rehearsal at Full Gospel Evangelist Church, 3/15/94, Hayti Heights, MO
7. Gospel Deliverance Music Fest at Monument of Deliverance Church, 3/13/94, Hayti, MO

By Jim Nelson with Jean Crandall:

1. Interview with the Echoes of Joy, 3/17/94, Howardville, MO

By Robin Fanslow:

1. Interview with Bishop Benjamin Armour, Sr., 3/16/94, Hayti Heights, MO

By Dana Everts-Boehm:

1. Singing lesson with Mildred and Jasmine Whitehorn and Mary and Michelle Robinson, 12/5/94, Kennett, MO
2. Interview with Mildred Whitehorn, 3/26/95, Kennett, MO
3. Church service at the Homestown Church of God in Christ, 3/26/95, Homestown, MO
4. Performance by Mildred and Jasmine Whitehorn with Michelle Robinson at "Tuesdays at the Capital," 4/25/95, Jefferson City, MO.

# MISSOURI MASTERS AND THEIR TRADITIONAL ARTS

"The Masters and Their Traditional Arts" is an essay series written by experts in Missouri's folk arts, in association with the state's Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program. This essay was written by Jean Crandall and Dana Everts-Boehm, with editing assistance from Deborah Bailey. It is based on a design by Spencer Galloway for the series.

## The Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program

Missouri's Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program was initiated in 1984 by the Missouri Arts Council and the Cultural Heritage Center at the University of Missouri-Columbia, with funding from the state and the National Endowment for the Arts. After the Cultural Heritage Center closed in 1993, the Apprenticeship Program found a new home with the Missouri Folk Arts Program, a program of the Missouri Arts Council that is administered by the Museum of Art and Archaeology at the University of Missouri-Columbia.

The object of the Apprenticeship Program is to document the state's most active, talented tradition bearers and encourage them to pass their artistic skills down to aspiring apprentices. To date the program has funded a total of one hundred and two masters to teach two hundred and thirty apprentices. The cultural and regional heritage of the state is thus recognized, honored, and conserved for future generations.

Master folk artists generally learn their skills informally, through observation or imitation, rather than from books or institutional training. Their apprentices are most often members of the same ethnic, regional, occupational or religious community as the master. The art that they learn — whether it be African American gospel, Mexican paper flower making, cowboy poetry or Ozark jig dance, is deeply embedded in its community's history and daily life.

Program staff conducts fieldwork to find folk artists throughout the state, document their work with camera and tape recorder, and encourage them to apply to the program once they have found an apprentice. When the year's batch of applications come in, a panel of experts reviews them to select the most promising. Once selected, teams of master and apprentice work closely together for a period of nine to ten months. The masters and apprentices work together to conserve the state's cultural heritage for future generations.

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Folk Arts Program  
National Endowment for the Arts

