Traditions

African American Gospel
Cover photograph: Fellowship Temple men's choir of Manhattan.

Bach photograph. Today, gospel music is often accompanied by synthesizers, organs, drums, tambourines, and horns.
AFRICAN AMERICANS IN KANSAS

The history of Kansas statehood is closely tied to events in the Civil War. From the time Kansas Territory was opened for settlement, proslavery and antislavery forces fought for control of the territorial government. It is believed that freed and escaped slaves entered the eastern section of Kansas Territory through various stops on the underground railroad. According to the 1860 census, 625 free and two enslaved African Americans were residents of the territory. Kansas entered the union in 1861 as a free state.

After the start of the Civil War, African Americans in Kansas formed volunteer military units to fight the Confederates. The First Kansas Colored Infantry, based at Fort Scott, was the first African American unit to see action in the Civil War. In Wyandotte County Black recruits were more numerous than white. At the end of the Civil War, 186,000 African Americans were serving in combat troops for the United States, and another 200,000 served in support units. The integration of these units into other army operations was an unpopular idea. In 1866 the United States Congress authorized two cavalry regiments and two infantry units composed entirely of African Americans. These men were sent to Kansas to fight a series of Indian wars. The first post of the buffalo soldiers, as they became known, was Fort Leavenworth, the oldest military base west of the Mississippi River. From there the soldiers were sent to western Kansas and to points farther west.

After the Civil War, Kansas was advertised as a good place for African Americans to settle. The 1859 Kansas Constitution opened the state to all settlers regardless of their ethnic or racial background. In the 1870 census Blacks made up 4.6 percent of the state's population. In the previous decade the African American population had dramatically risen from 627 to 17,108. Black settlement was concentrated primarily in the eastern part of the state, particularly in Atchison, Douglas, Leavenworth, and Wyandotte counties.
Gospel music is one of the strongest forms of expression among Black Americans in the United States.
What became known as the exoduster movement or the Exodus of 1879, in which freed slaves from the deep South migrated to Kansas, had its roots in an earlier attempt to colonize the state. In 1873 Benjamin "Pap" Singleton, a former slave, purchased one thousand acres of public land near Baxter Springs. In 1874 three hundred Blacks established the Cherokee colony on this land. To Singleton, Kansas was an "asylum for the freedmen of the South." To sell his point, Singleton advertised Kansas to African Americans through posters and pamphlets. Altogether Singleton would claim he persuaded 7,432 individuals to settle in Kansas. The majority of these African Americans were from Kentucky and Tennessee, and they came to Kansas with at least a small amount of resources to start their new lives.

Necodemus is the best known of the Black settlements. This small rural community was settled in 1877 by a group of freedmen from Scott County, Kentucky. They named their town after a legendary slave who was said to have purchased his own freedom. The African American community had a rough beginning owing to scarce resources and difficult weather conditions. A few of the original settlers returned to cities in the eastern part of the state or to the South. However, enough people stayed so that the first school district in Graham County was organized in Necodemus in 1879.

Difficult economic times and political pressures forced thousands of poor Blacks to leave the South. The largest migration of African Americans to Kansas occurred in 1879 with the exoduster movement. These migrants came to Kansas with little resources. They were often dependent upon relief organizations such as the Kansas Freedmen's Relief Association. Kansans did not eagerly welcome the exodusters, and much of the relief needed to help these African American migrants came from out of state. Many of the exodusters took up residents in eastern Kansas cities. Eventually they were encouraged to resettle across the state so that no single town would have to absorb large numbers of workers into its labor force.

Although Kansas had once been called the "greatest, grandest and freest of all states," some African Americans found their experiences in Kansas to be discouraging. Although the Kansas Constitution welcomed people of all ethnic and racial backgrounds, many whites who had previously settled the state were not as generous to their new Black neighbors. Bad economic times also were difficult for African Americans. Some Blacks left the state for the unsettled territory that would become Oklahoma, and some returned to the South. However, a great many stayed and called Kansas home.

The eastern portion of Kansas saw another wave of Black migration during the twentieth century. In the 1920s and 1930s African Americans arrived in Kansas primarily from Arkansas and Missouri where the mechanization of the cotton industry and general bad economic times had forced them to leave their homes. Jobs in the thriving meat packing industry provided the lure of better economic conditions. However, not all Kansans welcomed the arrival of African Americans. For instance, certain neighborhoods remained officially restricted in Kansas City, Kansas, until the 1940s, and some businesses refused to provide services for Black residents.

Governmental policy in Kansas has at times been ambivalent toward racial equality. The state universities in Kansas have always admitted African American students. In 1870 the first Black student enrolled at the University of Kansas. In the public school system, however, racial equality has faced problems. Hutchinson is the only Kansas city with a population of fifteen thousand or more to have had integrated public schools throughout its history. In the 1950s, Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka had thrust Kansas into the center of the national controversy surrounding school segregation. In 1951 the Topeka Board of Education operated under the doctrine of "separate but equal" with regard to its public schools. Although schools were segregated, they did not have the gross inequalities found in other states. Rev. Oliver Brown filed a lawsuit on behalf of his daughter Linda who wanted to attend a neighborhood school but was denied enrollment because of segregation policies. The case was taken to the United States Supreme Court by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Thurgood Marshall led a team of lawyers who argued that the effects of separating African American children from others resulted in "a feeling of inferiority." In May of 1954 segregation was struck down by the court when it
concluded that separate educational facilities were inherently unequal. Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka became the basis for national desegregation efforts. The case, however, continues under litigation.

**THE AFRICAN AMERICAN CHURCH IN KANSAS**

As slaves, African Americans in the United States were denied access to established institutions. The one Black institution that slaveowners sometimes permitted was the church. For this reason the church offered not only spiritual guidance for the Black community but also suggestions of hope. The Black church also celebrates the African American heritage of its members.

Before the Civil War two Black churches already existed in what would become Kansas City, Kansas. Both the First Baptist and the First African Methodist Episcopal (AME) were organized in 1859. The two congregations met together for several years until the groups grew too large. Within seven years each congregation built its own church. The Independent Baptist Church of Leavenworth is also believed to be one of the earliest Black churches in Kansas.

As more former slaves migrated to Kansas from the South, additional churches were established to serve Black communities. St. Luke AME Church in Lawrence was founded in 1862. In 1865 the Second Baptist, Topeka's first African American church, was established. In Emporia, Mount Olive AME was organized in 1870, and St. James Baptist was founded in 1873. In 1878 Calvary Baptist Church was established to serve Wichita's African American community. Well before the turn of the century, Black churches were established in Salina, Nicodemus, and Manhattan.

**THE HISTORY OF GOSPEL**

Traditional gospel music has its roots in the slave songs, field hollers, and spirituals which express confidence in a power beyond mortal comprehension. In part, gospel music can be characterized as troubled music because it expresses the fears, frustrations, and anxieties created by the struggles African Americans have faced. Yet it is also viewed as happy music of hope, joy, and possibilities. Gospel music is a combination of art, music, literature, dance, poetry, and biography. It is one of the strongest forms of expression among Black Americans in the United States.

Some scholars believe the roots of gospel can be traced back to 1619. A Dutch freighter landed in Jamestown, Virginia, with twenty captured Africans. The African slaves were met by a small group of Europeans, and with this meeting a fusion of cultures began.
Gospel music would eventually follow a particular pattern that combined European melodies with African rhythms.

By 1895 traditional gospel music was performed in churches and at camp meetings in a traveling format. It was prominent in the founding of Black Pentecostal-Holiness groups. During worship the entire congregation was expected to join in by "lifting their voices to sing" in an unrehearsed manner. However, when gospel music was performed in a traveling format by evangelist singers, it was well-rehearsed and considered more of a performance.

By the 1920s the Baptist churches had adopted gospel music as part of their worship experience. A network of gospel groups and quartettes was developed that performed at many Pentecostal churches and other churches throughout the African American communities. Gospel conventions were a large part of this networking and are still part of Black church activities.

During the 1920s-1940s, gospel music continued to spread. Songs were written and recorded, and tours to Black communities across the United States helped to make these songs popular. Gospel singers and groups as well as concert artists brought their music to Black Kansans who considered these performances moments of great celebration. Although they were allowed to express themselves through their music, African Americans faced racial prejudice in many areas. When the legendary gospel singer Marian Anderson appeared in concert at Fort Riley in 1950, lodging for her was arranged with a Black Manhattan family because hotels that accommodated African Americans at that time received unfavorable telephone calls from townspeople.

Gospel music in the African American tradition has spanned many lifetimes. Selections such as "What a Friend We Have in Jesus," "Amazing Grace," "Precious Lord," and "The Old Ship of Zion" are almost universally known by Black Kansans. While these songs were not all composed by African Americans, they were adopted, improvised, and shaped to fit the social, religious, and emotional needs of the people.

**THE NATURE OF GOSPEL**

According to the noted African American poet Langston Hughes, "Gospel singers do not rehearse songs. They listen and absorb; they improvise." Traditional Black churches use gospel music on a weekly basis to elevate the mind from daily responsibilities, economic limitations, and social disapproval. During worship, gospel songs are performed, and members of the congregation express themselves with responses. The music communicates like no other factor of the worship experience.

Gospel is usually accompanied by hand-clapping, foot-tapping, and sometimes by shouting. The text of many gospel songs is often taken from the Bible, while others are drawn directly from personal experiences. Many gospel songs are testimonies of inspiration and declamations of faith. Some are slow and solemn, while many are rhythmic and spirited.

Unlike earlier spirituals and field hollers, the gospel song is a composed piece, although singers often do not use sheet music while singing or performing. This reflects the oral nature of African American culture. Gospel music is a way of expressing what one feels without having to follow too closely to written lyrics. One can hear a song once or twice and be able to sing or perform it with remarkable accuracy. With gospel music, however, accuracy is not as important as involvement, intensity, and personal identification.

Another important factor within gospel music is the freedom to improvise. It is a relaxed form of music. Each song is interpreted and adapted by the individual who sings it. Therefore, many different versions of the same song can be heard. A characteristic of gospel singing is the adding of extra words to the original text of a song. These words may complement the text or may be completely unrelated and used to fill spaces in the melody. The practice of dividing and subdividing the beat provides more pulses and a greater opportunity to add words. As singers become emotionally involved in the performances, they are apt to express personal involvement by adding words and phrases.
CHANGES

Currently, gospel music is enjoying a wider audience. This causes it to be influenced by popular forms of entertainment and has resulted in numerous changes. The lyrics of traditional gospel music reflect the experiences of hope, joy and difficulties overcome. In more recent times, however, those lyrics have become less focused on a supreme being's involvement in our lives. Lyrics now often refer to relationships with other human beings. Major American music festivals now include gospel music, which makes it necessary for performers to adhere to specific formats found more often in secular music. Historically, gospel music was usually accompanied by only a piano. Today it is common to find synthesizers, organs, drums, full orchestras, single saxophones, and rhythm sections supported by tambourines and bongos accompanying gospel. While many changes have taken place in the performance of gospel music, the basic characteristics of unison singing and call and response remain.

CONCLUSION

Gospel music is performed primarily by those who share the ultimate meaning of the lyrics. Many African Americans have experienced at some time inhuman treatment. Gospel music embraces these realities. The music is the combination of many things, and it represents the essence of Black America's need to communicate both with each other and with the world. It is a music designed more for inspiration than for entertainment. Like the blues, it is a Black art form, but unlike the blues, it is the music of hope.

Although gospel music is available on sheet music, the vast majority of gospel interpretations remain in oral tradition. Within the African American community, gospel music serves as a vehicle to communicate a cultural connectedness. While some may view it as American music, it remains the purest combination of European melodies and African rhythms.

Further Readings


Jesus Hears Every Prayer

By Clara Ward.

Jesus hears every prayer, He understands all about us
He watches over His children, He understands all about us
On the streets, in our homes, on the job — On the road
He's everywhere, and He understands all about us.

Father (Oh, Father)
Father (Oh, Father)
Father (Oh, Father)
Father (Oh, Father)
Father (Oh, Father)

I stretch my hands to Thee — No other help I know
If thou withdraw thyself from me — Where, Lord, shall I go?

Jesus hears every prayer, He understands all about us
He watches over His children, He understands all about us.

Amazing Grace

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me
I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see.

Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fear relieved
How precious did that grace appear, the hour I first believed.

Through many dangers, toils and snares, I have already come
His grace had brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.

When we've been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun
We've no less days to sing God's grace, then when we first begun.

During worship, gospel songs are performed and members of the congregation express themselves with responses.
TRADITIONS

Kansas has a rich and diverse folk art heritage. Within the state, artists continue to practice art forms that are passed on from parent to child, worker to worker, and neighbor to neighbor. Knowledge is taught by word of mouth or by example. Our folk arts are traditional in that they are part of an unbroken thread that can be traced back through time. No set time period is necessary, however, for a particular behavior to become part of our folklore. Instead, an art form must have existed long enough to enable variations to develop. Once something is “in tradition” it no longer exists in a standardized form. Instead, local variants can be found.

Folk art is community bound. We all belong to many groups or communities throughout our lifetimes. Ethnic, religious, occupational, and familial are but a few of the communities in which we maintain memberships. To provide continuity in our lives, some communities extend over time and distance thereby creating a traditional culture. The folk arts of a group have been selected and supported by a number of people within the community. A folk art is the product of a series of choices made by individuals which in turn have been accepted by the group. Folk culture therefore represents the sum total of a community’s choices, linking the present to the past.

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