

**"And with the changing music came a new style of performance, a style that emphasized movement and improvisation, a style that demanded emotional involvement and personalized expression."**

Robert Darden, Author of *People Get Ready: A New History of Black Gospel Music*

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## Songs of Hope and Freedom

If there is a form of music that can be considered the most influential of American musical genres, it would be black gospel music. Rooted in the history of the slave trade and emerging into mainstream popularity in the 1900s, black gospel has influenced everything from soul music and the blues to modern R&B and rock-and-roll.

Yet, black gospel music is much more than a cultural lode of American history and remains to this day, an expression of faith by men and women who love to sing in praise of God. Its glorious sound transcends emotion and its powerful lyrics speak of the hopes and struggles that have inspired the prayers of generations of African-Americans.

### Chains of Bondage

The origins of black gospel music can be traced back to the 1600s and the days of slavery. Africans were enslaved and brought to America – and with them, they brought their unique musical heritage. One element from this heritage which is present in black gospel music to this day is the call-and-response song pattern, in which a leader sings a line and the entire group answers.

Yet, from the need to subjugate, many American slave owners forbade their African slaves from playing or singing their native music. Around the same time, these slaves were introduced to Christianity and were converted in large numbers. The church became a sanctuary for black slaves and was a place where they could once again express themselves through music.

This combination of factors gave birth to black spirituals and slave songs; songs echoing Christian themes of salvation and freedom from bondage, and yet featuring African vocal stylings and rhythms.

### After the Emancipation

The role of the church (and the musical traditions associated with the church) remained central to the lives of freed slaves even after their emancipation in the late 1800s. Black spirituals and slave songs evolved into the tradition that is now recognised as black gospel music.

Having shaped the development of the blues and jazz music, gospel music was in turn influenced by these new forms of music. The sounds of black gospel music became more sophisticated and energetic.

Improvised passages, *melisma* (when a single syllable is sung in a series of different

notes) expressive delivery and call-and-response exchanges came to characterise black gospel music.

### **Contemporary Gospel Choirs**

Since the 1950s, rousing black contemporary gospel choirs such as the Harlem Gospel Choir have risen to preeminence. Call-and-response songs are still very much part of these choirs' repertoires, but the body of music continues to evolve. Black urban pop music, modern jazz and blues music have all influenced and continue to influence the genre.

The Harlem Gospel Choir, in particular, is synonymous with power vocals, glorious sound and infectious energy. Their performances are energetic and audiences are free to stand up and express themselves; be it through singing along, clapping or tapping their feet.