



## **CHOIR ANNIVERSARY**

### **CULTURAL RESOURCES**

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#### **I. Historical Background**

The Choir Anniversary, regardless of denomination, has held historic and sentimental importance in the life of the black church. It is traditionally thought to be one of the high days of celebration in the black church, second in importance only to the Church

Anniversary and/or Homecoming and the Pastor's Anniversary—depending on whom you ask. Various forms of celebration, which range from weeklong events leading up to the selected Sunday of celebration or one daylong celebration, mark the day.

The Choir Anniversary draws on communal and denominational relationships as guest ministers, choirs, gospel ensembles and soloists along with commemorative performances of the celebrating choir form the core participation in these activities. The culminating event is very often a special concert or musical that not only includes elaborate ornate musical performances but also marks one of the few times within the life of the church that the contributions of the church musicians, ministers of music, choir directors and choirs are celebrated.

While the musical performances that largely encompass the choir anniversary are noteworthy, it is the pageantry that accompanies these performances in the form of attire, performance aesthetic and choreography that is legendary. The Choir Anniversary is often the time in which new attire is unveiled to the church and larger community. This attire ranges from choir robes to decorated dresses and suits in fashionable colors. The intention is to heighten the visual aspect of the performance. Some mainline churches have retained the tradition of wearing formal choir robes, but more and more church choirs are suspending the practice, preferring a variety of outfits that are selected for Sunday and guest performances.

Maintaining a strong and historic link between music and dance, choir choreography remains an important aspect of the choir ethos, and the choir anniversary processional provides the opportunity to unveil new steps. While some mainline churches have limited this choreography to the traditional side-to-side shuffle, others have witnessed the incorporation of modified steps adapted from “The Electric Slide,” “The Cabbage Patch,” the underground club dance called the “Vogue,” as well as other secular dances. Despite some of the obvious theological issues the incorporation of these moves has raised, choreography remains an important part of the aesthetic of the church choir. The musical performances that accompany the Choir Anniversary reflect the highest standard, with the celebrating choir often setting the standard with its performance. What one witnesses in subsequent performances is an attempt by each group, choir or soloist to “tear down the church,” which is a colloquialism for moving the audience to an ecstatic state reflected in shouting, verbal exclamations or being “slain in the spirit” (i.e. one passing out). Each guest is generally asked to provide an “A” and “B” selection but, in some cases, this could be extended to three selections with the performance of a “theme song” or “processional.” The performer can begin the latter while still seated in the audience and/or while marching to the choir stand or front of the church. All of these performances are occurring in an environment of friendly competition. In addition to performing, in some instances, visitors are asked or expected to contribute financially to the church in honor of the hosting choir, as the anniversary celebration sometimes serves as one of the major fundraising initiatives of the host choir. The Choir Anniversary is emblematic of the importance music has within the black church.

## **II. The Historic Importance of the Church Musician**

From the musician who plays by ear to the college/conservatory-trained, the church musician or, in the case of many churches, Minister of Music, has formed part of the foundation of the musical culture of the black church. While mega-churches and many larger mainline churches maintain rosters of full-time, highly-paid musicians, most churches function with one or two primary musicians who often rely on supplemental employment to make a living. Nevertheless, these musicians have historically served for years, many times without any formal recognition beyond the celebration of the Choir Anniversary.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century black church marked the rise and dominance of female musicians/directors in many churches. In fact, serving as the church musician and/or choir director was one of the few leadership roles in which women could function in old-line, traditional denominations. It was through their interpretations of traditional hymns, gospel songs, and anthems that various performance aesthetics were created and standardized. However, by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the female church musician was becoming an anomaly due to the evolving performance practice defined in contemporary gospel and fraternal circles that sometimes created hostile environments or excluded their female counterparts from advancing their musical talents. There are, however, some female musicians who, having overcome these obstacles, are functioning within the ministerial life of churches and parishes and training the next generation of musicians.

Regardless of gender or size of the congregation, there are some universal expectations and experiences that shape the life of the church musician. In addition to constructing and maintaining an ever-evolving repertory of songs for Sunday services, there is this expectation that supplemental services such as accompanying the pastor on preaching engagements or assembling impromptu choirs for funerals are necessary and required parts of the job. But as churches become more focused on strengthening their music ministries, or constructing “dream teams” of vocalists and musicians, the idea of the church musician who remains with one church for a number of years is quickly becoming a passing tradition.

### **III. My Testimony**

One of my earliest memories of church is the music and the church choir. Growing up in southwestern Virginia in the heart of the Blue Ridge Mountains, I experienced many diverse and varied traditions. I learned very early that there was nothing homogenous about the black church or its music. My parents and the majority of my father’s family went to a traditional Baptist church. When I say traditional, I mean traditional. We followed the program “as-is,” and every song was listed in it. There was no deviation from the program unless the Pastor sanctioned it, and the only person who ever “shouted in the spirit” was Mrs. Gunn, one of the older members of the church. She was known for her periodic exclamations of “hallelujah” or “amen” if moved by the spirit. But everyone else remained much more sedate and unemotional. That’s not to say that the spirit didn’t move. It’s just that if it did—a look to tone it down was probably given!

This experience was much more personal to me because my family was heavily involved in the musical life of the church. Not only did my father and all of my cousins and aunts sing in the choir, but also four generations of my family—beginning with my grandmother and extending through several uncles, aunts and cousins—had been the church organist, pianist, or choir director. So when it was announced that I would start piano lessons at the age of three, it was obvious that I was being prepared for a life of service. My experiences extended beyond the host of anthems, arranged spirituals and gospel songs that encompassed the traditions at the Trinity Baptist Church. My maternal great-grandmother attended a Pentecostal Holiness church. My excursions to her church had the most impact on my development as an instrumentalist, singer, choir director and worshipper. There, I experienced a frenetic energy that went beyond Mrs. Gunn’s occasional shouting and exclamations. I encountered a strong vocal tradition that was unaccompanied except for the clicking of heels on the wood floors, polyrhythmic clapping of hands, and occasionally a blues guitar or tambourine. There was no organ, no program, and no choir. There was just the Pastor’s wife, whose strong voice bellowed beyond the walls of the church and the communal singing in which she led the congregation. Songs such as “I’m a Soldier in the Army of the Lord,” “Stand By Me,” and “Can’t Nobody Do Me Like Jesus” seemed to move seamlessly from one to the other. As a child, I watched in awe as the singing grew in intensity, culminating with the “falling of the spirit” with someone shouting, passing out, or speaking in tongues. I loved the Sundays I accompanied my great-grandmother to church just as much as I liked singing out of the hymnbooks that peppered each pew at my parent’s church.

My singing ability led to my becoming one of the youngest members of the Celestial Choir, *the* choir at my parent’s church. And my greatest memories involve the Choir Anniversary and the annual concert. Even as a young child (note: I became an official member at age four; I have the pictures and memories to prove it), I understood the importance of the Choir Anniversary, and each year we worked like crazy to prepare for the day. We not only worked on new music, but also had new dresses made and raised money through our individual patron lists. I also remember that the worst part of the anniversary for me was when the music stopped and each individual announced to the audience the amount of money they raised and turned in their large, bulging brown envelopes. For me, the most exciting part of the celebration was witnessing all of the different performances and hearing the different songs that people from within the larger community of churches performed. I was often introduced to the “newest” gospel song or some “new” version of an old hymn or devotional song. But secretly, I loved the Choir Anniversary largely because it was the one Sunday where we, the choir, were the focal point.

My love for music grew as well as my aptitude for the piano, and I sought voraciously to merge this schizophrenic-like musical identity I had developed. It led to me being reprimanded for “jazzing” up the hymns when I played and, eventually, not being asked to play at all at the very church where my grandmother had played and my cousin served as Minister of Music. But this musical exile led to me playing for a number of churches and groups throughout the city. With every choir, I grew not only in my instrumental technique, but also in learning how to extract the best from vocalists. Choir anniversaries

became a normal part of my “ministerial” duties and I, along with the choirs I directed and played for, sought to bring performances that would make the angels quiet their praise. My experience as a musician even extended to the high school choir, and I was relied upon to keep things going when the music teacher was absent. Little did I know that these experiences, coupled with college instruction and an awakened consciousness about my role as a “minister” of God’s music, would lead to 24 years of active service in music ministries across the country and within varied denominations.

But the biggest impact on my development as a musician was my years as a music major at Virginia State University. The four years I matriculated at State marked a significant period in the development of my “ear” and “musical voice.” Never had I heard some of the chords and notes which some of my colleagues sang and played. Their experiences, which stretched from storefront churches in New York City to rural Baptist and Holiness churches in Mississippi and Alabama excited me, and it was a normal to spend hours in the practice rooms trying to learn new chords, or playing the newest gospel song. Chord substations, jazz-influenced riffs and scales became a part of my daily discussions, and not just in theory classes. I wanted to play in the way I heard others play, but with a passion that made it seem like second nature. All of this, of course, was done after 6:00 p.m. when most of the faculty had gone home. The music department at Virginia State, like many black colleges then, had some strict policies forbidding the performance of gospel music and jazz. If caught playing either, a student could lose practice room privileges, or be asked to leave the program. I never knew anyone who suffered that fate, but it was a part of the urban mythology of the department. So we worked out different ways where we could still grow as jazz and gospel musicians and master Western Art tradition. Those years shaped my perspective on the validity of having students have as many diverse musical experiences as possible. The combination of the traditional curriculum, secret practice sessions, and my previous experiences freed me to construct my own personal style that would not only inform my decisions as a minister of music and pianist, but also as a scholar and writer. In subsequent years, I went on to play for a number of churches, at times in different cities and states. During that time, I experienced interactions with pastors who thought, because I was a woman I needed to be the associate Minister of Music despite having more experience and education than my male counterparts. But I’ve also had my contributions celebrated and appreciated, grown musically through congregations which, on any given Sunday, would engage in the singing of long-meter hymns, traditional congregational songs such as “Come and Go to that Land,” or the newest Kirk Franklin song. Most of all, I have attempted to prepare many choirs for that one day when they go beyond being singers who just stand before the congregation, to entertain others—and are instead celebrated for their invocation of the Spirit.

#### **IV. Songs for this Moment on the Lectionary Calendar**

All choirs are to sing to glorify God. When God is glorified, God can draw persons to him. When persons are drawn to God, they are inspired, healed, reborn and even saved. The following choir anniversary selections are in keeping with the notion of singing to glorify God.

## **Incredible God, Incredible Praise**

Solo:

I've had some problems some great and some small  
You being God delivered me from them all  
Still can't believe all the ways you've made  
An incredible God deserves incredible praise.

Chorus:

What kind of God would do this for me?  
Victory, grace and mercy,  
He is so special, simply incredible, he's so incredible,  
An incredible God deserves incredible praise.

Solo:

Oh, oh, oh, o-o-oh, oh, oh, oh

Bridge:

Praise, incredible, praise, incredible  
Praise, he deserves, incredible praise.

Vamp:

Hallelujah,  
Lord we love you,  
Lord we bless you,  
He's incredible!

He's a healer,  
He's a keeper,  
Lord we love you,

He's incredible!

He's incredible!

An incredible God deserves an incredible praise.<sup>1</sup>

## **Lift Him Up**

For he is worthy  
He is worthy to be praised.

Lift him up  
Lift the Savior higher (Repeat)

For he is worthy to be praised.

We have come into this house  
To magnify his name (Repeat)

For he is worthy to be praised

There is none in heaven or earth like you  
There is none in heaven or earth like you  
There is none in heaven or earth like you  
There is none in heaven or earth like you.<sup>2</sup>

### **Perpetual Praise**

Chorus:

Perpetual praise and continual prayer  
take the joy of the Lord with you everywhere  
Perpetual prayer and continual praise  
acknowledge him in all of your ways.  
(X2)

Verse 1:

The bible says to pray and don't cease  
we should always stay on our knees  
Interceding every day, for a lost and dying world  
to know the way.

(Chorus X2)

Verse 2:

Paul told us that every saint  
Ought to pray and never faint,  
and in these last and evil days  
we must always give God the praise.

(Sopranos)

I will bless the Lord at all times  
Take the joy of the Lord with you everywhere.  
(X2)

(Add Altos)

Perpetual praise, continual prayer  
Take the joy of the Lord with you everywhere.  
(X2)

(Add Tenors)

Lift up your hands and bless him  
Stand on your feet and praise him

Take the Lord with you everywhere.  
(X2)

Lift up your hands and bless him  
Stand on your feet and praise him  
Give God the glory  
perpetual praise.  
(Repeat)

Perpetual praise.  
(Pause Ending)

Verse 3:  
If you want to walk in victory  
You've got to praise him, perpetual  
(Give God) Give God the glory  
Perpetual praise.

If you want everything to work out right  
You've got to praise him morning, 'noon and night  
(Give God) Give God the glory  
Perpetual praise.

It doesn't matter who is looking at me  
I'm gonna praise him perpetually.

(Give God) Give God the glory  
(Give God the glory) Give God the glory.<sup>3</sup>

**Sing!**  
Now is the time for all people  
From every land to come together  
Now is the moment for worship  
We enter in, withholding nothing  
He's worthy, exalted  
He's high and lifted up.

Sing, sing unto the Lord  
Open up your heart  
Make a joyful noise (in the sanctuary)  
Sing, sing unto the Lord  
Lavish him with love  
Let the praises ring in the sanctuary.

Sing!

Gotta' open up your mouth and give him praise  
Open up your heart and give him praise  
Lift up holy hands, unashamed in the sanctuary  
Gotta' open up your mouth and give him praise  
Open up your heart and give him praise  
Lift up holy hands  
Sing, sing, sing.<sup>4</sup>

**Sing Your Praises**

I love to sing, I love to sing  
Sing your praises  
I love to sing, I love to sing.

Sopranos:  
Sing your praises  
Sing your praises  
Sing your praises  
Sing.

Altos:  
I love to sing, I love to sing  
Sing your praises  
I love to sing, I love to sing.

Tenors:  
For your glory  
For your honor  
For your glory  
sing.<sup>5</sup>

**We'll Be Faithful**

Solo Verse 1&2:  
Forgetting what lies behind  
keeping our eyes on the prize:

Choir:  
Keeping our eyes on the Lord Jesus

Soloist:  
Running the race to win  
all the way to the end.

Choir:  
Laying down all that  
seems to hinder us.

Chorus:  
We'll be faithful to our calling  
for you are able  
to keep us from falling.

For in your promise  
We will trust  
You'll be able to finish.  
The work you began in us  
You'll be able to finish  
the work you began in us.<sup>6</sup>

## **V. Suggested for Choir Anniversaries**

- a. If your church does not have the African American Heritage Hymnal in its pews and choir loft(s), it needs this great resource. This hymnal is comprehensive, balanced and a treasure for any choir and congregation. It can be obtained through GIA Publishing.
- b. A great gift for choir members would be the CD titled Great Choirs of America: A Celebration of Voices. Portland, OR: Pamplin Music, 2000.

### **Notes**

1. Hairston, James. "Incredible God, Incredible Praise." Youthful Praise Live! the Praise-- the Worship. New York, NY: Evidence Gospel, 2005.
2. Moore, James. "Lift Him Up." Live at Jackson State University. Jackson, MS: Malaco Records, 1995.
3. Purpose, and Bam Crawford. "Perpetual Praise." The King Is Coming Any Day! New York, NY: Harmony, 1997.
4. Swearingen, Jon, and Martha Munizzi. "Sing." The Best Is yet to Come. [New York]: Integrity Music, 2003.
5. Marks, Austin and the MIT Choir. "Sing Your Praises." MIT Choir 2007 Selections. Boston, MA, Self-published, 2007.
6. Merritt, Andrew. "We'll Be Faithful." Faith in the House. New York, N.Y.: Integrity/Epic, 2000.