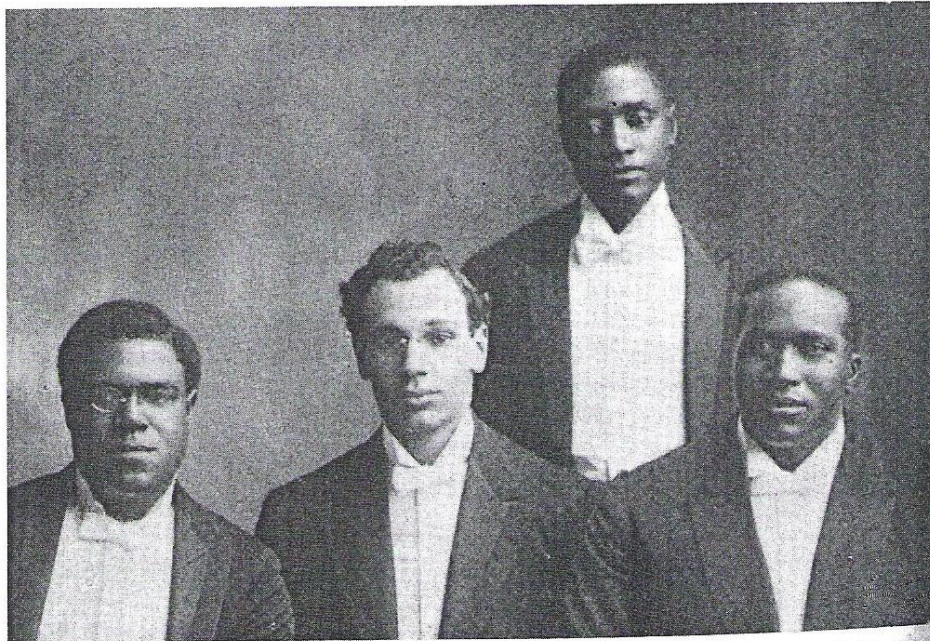


Gospel Quartets

The African American gospel quartet, a male vocal group featuring one singer per voice part, is considered a sacred ensemble, although historically quartets have performed both secular and sacred repertoire. Quartets include a tenor, lead singer, baritone, and bass, although they may also use a second lead or second tenor, resulting in “quartets” with more than four singers. The genre has developed from the late 19th century to the present, at times achieving national commercial prominence, and at times flourishing primarily at the regional level.

The genre’s roots lie in at least three streams of American music traditions in the late 1800s: university jubilee choirs, minstrelsy, and folk or barbershop quartets. In the 1880s, African American universities such as Fisk and Hampton often sponsored choral groups that performed a cappella arrangements of old slave spirituals. These “jubilee” choirs performed the arrangements using formal vocal timbres, precise diction, and Western European stage demeanor. Within several years, university quartets based on similar musical principles grew out of the jubilee choirs. The quartets that emerged from these university-sponsored choirs shared their repertoire of arranged spirituals and their formal, classical approach to timbre, diction, and stage demeanor. After graduation, university-trained quartet singers often influenced vocal groups in their hometowns. Likewise in the last few decades of the 19th century, traveling minstrel shows also featured quartets that performed some of the same arranged spirituals as did their university counterparts, in addition to singing patriotic and novelty songs. Simultaneously, more



Jubilee Quartets were a prominent fixture in the black community during the first half of the 20th century. (New York Public Library)

informal folk or barbershop quartets were springing up in African American communities, providing entertainment at events such as barbecues and rent parties. Participation in community quartets was an extremely popular recreational activity among African American males in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

During the Great Migrations of the early 20th century, many African Americans relocated to Northern or urban areas, attracted by employment opportunities in those regions. Two such areas, Jefferson County, Alabama, and the Tidewater area of Virginia, became important centers of quartet singing in the early 1900s. Alabama steel and coal miners and Virginia ship-industry workers formed numerous quartets, chiefly because other recreational opportunities were so limited. Jefferson County quartets such as the Foster Singers and Sterling Jubilee Singers sometimes are described as having a more rural or raw sound, although they still clearly were influenced by the aesthetic of the university jubilee choirs. Quartet arrangements from Jefferson County tended to be more homophonic, with all four voices functioning fairly equally. On the other hand, Tidewater quartets such as the Silver Leaf Quartette favored a smoother, more polished sound; the Virginia quartets of the early 1900s also used innovations such as falsetto singing and more independence between the lead singer and the background singers, which influenced later quartets. In both regions, groups performed in churches and in venues related to their jobs, providing audiences with both religious expression and entertainment. Repertoire included arranged spirituals, early gospel hymns, and some secular pieces. By the 1920s, quartets such as the Birmingham Jubilee Quartet from Jefferson County and the Norfolk Jubilee/Jazz Quartet from Virginia had issued recordings that were disseminated across their respective regions; some quartets from these areas began to tour full time.

Although the first commercial recording of an African American quartet dated from 1895, when the Standard Negro Quartette in Chicago was recorded by Columbia Records (Lornell 2001, 150), quartets did not have a major presence in the recording industry until the 1920s. During that decade, the quartet sound was disseminated to a national audience thanks to "race records" and the fledgling radio industry. By the early 1930s, the genre's popularity had risen, as witnessed by the numbers of quartets recording and touring during these years. At the end of the 1930s, the Golden Gate Quartet of Norfolk, Virginia, drew international attention with their sophisticated musical arrangements, complicated rhythmic patterns, polyphonic textures, and jazz-influenced harmonies. Additionally, the group's professional stage presence and mixed repertoire of arranged spirituals, secular songs, and the new gospel compositions by composers such as Thomas Dorsey and Sallie Martin made them one of the most innovative and influential groups in the genre's history. The Gates appealed to racially mixed audiences, eventually appearing in venues such as New York's Café Society and Carnegie Hall.

The increasing number of high-quality professional, semiprofessional, and amateur gospel quartets caused the genre to boom in the early 1940s. Cities like Chicago, Philadelphia, and Memphis boasted scores of local and visiting gospel quartets who performed at churches, school auditoriums, and gymnasiums, along with issuing commercial recordings. Radio stations featured live performances of quartets

broadcast from the studio, typically including jingles promoting the group's sponsors (often flour or baking soda companies). In the late 1930s and early 1940s, quartets like the Soul Stirrers and Famous Blue Jay Singers toured professionally, exciting audiences with their matching suits, choreography, and polished arrangements. Additionally, musical influences from the worship of Pentecostal/Holiness churches began to affect the style and delivery of gospel quartets: lead singers in particular began to experiment with a more emotional, improvisatory vocal style. The repertoires of many quartets included exciting arrangements of the latest gospel compositions in addition to arranged spirituals and versions of other hymns.

After World War II, the emergence of independent record labels that produced exclusively African American music, along with the rise of "black-appeal" radio programming, jolted the quartet phenomenon fully into the national spotlight. Additionally, the establishment of the "chitlin' circuit"—an informal string of concert venues throughout the Southeast—gave R & B and gospel artists an established tour route, further increasing the exposure and popularity of the quartets. Throughout the next 20 years, quartet concerts became known as events promising both popular entertainment and exciting displays of religious expression. Quartet programs frequently included several groups, all of which were implicitly competing for the strongest audience reaction. The relationship of quartets and audience members became increasingly dynamic during these years, with lead singers jumping offstage and running through crowds to stir up religious excitement. Another favored technique for "working" the crowd included the addition of a second lead singer. Most likely pioneered by the Soul Stirrers, and known as the "swing lead," this arrangement allowed two vocalists to interact musically in a way that escalated a song's dramatic tension. (The Soul Stirrers were also among the first gospel quartets to experiment with instrumentation, another innovation of the 1950s.) Combined with the use of vocal devices, such as falsetto, growls, screams, textual interpolation, exploitation of extremes of the range, and extended sections of improvisation, the newer musical style was termed "hard gospel."

Audiences responded to groups like the Five Blind Boys of Alabama, the Sensational Nightingales, and the Dixie Hummingbirds by screaming, clapping, running, dancing, and "falling out" (a term used by Holiness/Pentecostal worshippers to describe an intense spiritual encounter with the divine that culminates in fainting). Countless young African American musicians such as Jackie Wilson, James Brown, Sam Cooke (lead singer of the Soul Stirrers for awhile), and Otis Redding came of age during this era; their musical sensibilities and notions of performance demeanor were radically shaped by the gospel quartets. Likewise, gospel quartets also influenced numerous white musicians.

After the mid-1960s, the mainstream visibility of the gospel quartets eroded quickly. Scholars cite several reasons for this decline, including market saturation, the growing popularity of the gospel choir-soloist format, audience disillusionment with the secular lifestyles of some gospel quartet singers, and new opportunities for African American males in other parts of the music industry. The genre returned to its roots as a regional phenomenon, with a few exceptions, such as the Fairfield Four and the Blind Boys of Alabama, remaining in (or eventually returning to) the national spotlight. Current gospel quartets typically

sound much different than their mid-century predecessors, thanks to the addition of keyboards, saxophones, and digitized instrumental tracks and the use of expanded repertoire and harmonic language. In other respects, the tradition has changed little, as quartets still wear matching suits, sometimes use choreography, and still interact heavily with audiences in moments of intense religious expression. Quartets across the United States maintain an active presence on the Internet, using social networking sites such as MySpace to list upcoming appearances, communicate with fans, and post digital copies of their recent recordings. Groups such as the Canton Spirituals and Lee Williams and the Spiritual QCs (both based in Mississippi) still tour at the regional and national level, performing at anniversaries, church services, and revivals, as well as on television shows, along with releasing full-length compact discs of original songs and arrangements.

See also Black Church Music—History; Black-Owned Record Labels; Gospel Music; Spirituals.

Further Reading

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Carrie Allen

Gospel Quartets

See Gospel Music.

Graves, Denyce (1964–)

Mezzo-soprano Denyce Graves is a leading figure in the 21st-century opera and classical music scenes. She attended the Duke Ellington School of Music in Washington, D.C., where she developed her singing talents and love for music. She received formal training at Oberlin College and at the New England Conservatory, and her promise as an operatic superstar was realized in the years immediately following her conservatory years. She was a Met Opera National finalist in 1988 and won many more awards between 1988 and 1991, including first place awards at the New England Metropolitan Opera Auditions, the National Association of Teachers of Singing Competition (three consecutive years), and the Grand Prix Lyrique. Since her Metropolitan Opera debut in the lead role of *Carmen* (1995), she has performed at many major international opera houses. Her status as one of the premiere singers in the United States was confirmed when she was invited to sing "America, the Beautiful" and "The Lord's Prayer" at the Washington National Cathedral for a memorial service