



Gospel Music History and Glossary

“The type of singing that we call Gospel singing is a tradition among Negroes. It seemed to have originated in the South, in southern Negro churches, and of course when the Negro began to migrate to the Middle West, and the North, and the East, he took his music with him. Aretha kind of inherited that tradition, that religious culture.”

– Rev. C.L. Franklin, father of Aretha Franklin

Gospel Music has had an extraordinary and often underappreciated influence on 20th century popular music. Countless Rock and Pop stars, from Little Richard to Aretha Franklin, began their musical journeys as singers and soloists in church choirs. To this point, Jerry Wexler of Atlantic Records, the man who coined the term "Rhythm and Blues" while working at Billboard Magazine, has said that he wished he had called it not "Rhythm and Blues," but "Rhythm and Gospel."

Many basic features of Gospel, such as “call-and-response” and the inclusion of complex rhythms, can be traced back to the West African traditions that slaves brought with them to America. As African Americans established independent churches in the 19th century, the rhythmic and highly emotional strains of Gospel began to take center stage in an entirely new style of Christian worship.

Over the following century, many different styles of Gospel emerged, including the more urban sound that accompanied those who moved northward during the Great Migration. Gospel also emerged as a form of secular entertainment in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. Gospel crossover vocalists, such as Mahalia Jackson, rose to prominence in the age of radio and television.

Gospel and West African Musical Traditions

As it developed in the United States, Gospel music reflected the influence of West African musical traditions. Common threads include the following.

Term:	Definition:
Call and Response	The interaction between a speaker and listeners in which the speaker’s statements—the “calls”—are answered by the listeners who respond. The responses may take many forms, including sung words, clapping, shouting, and other sounds. The same lyrics may be repeated over and over again.
Group Singing	Group singing occurs when multiple people sing at the same time. This type of performance was very common in West African religious tradition, but not very common in the white American Christian religious tradition of the 18th and 19th centuries. White Christian services of the time typically did not have a choir and singing was usually done by a soloist.
Complex Rhythms	Complex rhythms (multiple layers of percussion or clapping) were a part of West African music. In Gospel, this can be found when multiple instruments (drums, tambourine, piano) play different rhythms, or when different voices sing different rhythms.



Female Gospel Artists: Mahalia Jackson and Sister Rosetta Tharpe



Mahalia Jackson
(1911 - 1972)

Widely acknowledged as the "Queen of Gospel," Mahalia Jackson was a major musical and cultural force whose popularity and influence made her an icon in African-American culture for decades; Harry Belafonte once described her as "the single most powerful black woman in the United States." Possessing both a powerful presence and an authoritative contralto voice, Jackson remained one of America's top-selling Gospel artists for most of her career. In 1950, Jackson became the first Gospel singer to perform at New York's Carnegie Hall. In 1954, Jackson signed with Columbia Records and began hosting her own radio show with the CBS network, which was a rarity for African-American performers at the time. Later, she became an icon of the Civil Rights movement, ignoring death threats to perform at key rallies. She attended the 1963 March on Washington, where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his historic "I Have a Dream" speech. She and Dr. King were close friends. In 1968, Jackson sang Dr. King's favorite Gospel song "Take My Hand, Precious Lord" at his funeral. In 1972, Aretha Franklin sang that same hymn at Jackson's own funeral.



Sister Rosetta Tharpe
(1915 - 1973)

Sister Rosetta Tharpe was a guitar-toting, Gospel-crooning, chart-topping musical pioneer who crossed multiple boundaries and left a lasting imprint on Rock and Roll. Born in Cotton Plant, Arkansas he started singing and playing church music practically from the crib, and from the age of four traveled as a performer with an evangelical road show, billed as a child prodigy. She moved to Chicago and then New York City, cutting her first Gospel recordings there in 1938. The records had significant commercial success, their earthy, R&B-like sound appealing to crossover audiences even as it generated controversy among Gospel purists. Tharpe developed a style of performance that would freely mix traditional Gospel with the sound of the electric guitar and in turn influence performers from Little Richard to Elvis Presley and beyond. Tharpe broke down gender barriers by becoming one of the first successful female recording artists in American popular music to double as an electric guitarist and vocalist.