

DVD Reviews: Two of the America's Music Legacy Series: Gospel

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Images from the Internet

Part 2: This is just two of a series of DVDs that have been released to promote a collection of television specials from the 1980s that highlight specific genres of music, with each disc focusing on a one at a time.



America's Music Legacy: Gospel

Directed by Kip Walton

Cube International / Century Home Video, 1983 / 2010

105 minutes, USD \$16.95

Cubeinternational.com

Qleap.co.uk

MVDvisual.com

I did not really grow up with gospel; after all, it's not something we sang around lighting the menorah. Gospel did not really come into my consciousness at least until the mid-1980s, through Sweet Honey in the Rock, who help me appreciate the form.

Hosting this show is a *post-Kunta/pre-Geordi* LeVar Burton, obviously reading the text off cue cards, but clearly into the topic as well. Most of his comments and introductions appear to be independent of the actual program and inserted in, but that's just observation rather than a criticism.

Gospel truly is a joyful noise, full of spirituality, uplifting messages, and especially focused on two particulars: Jesus and repetition. There are a lot of both in a truly great gospel genre tune. A line in the chorus may get repeated numerous times, each one more excited than the one before. At least that is true in classic form (e.g., "Oh when the saints go marching in / Oh when those saints go marching in / Lord I want to be in that number / When the saints go marching in"). While less true in ballads, with any kind of raver the message is going to be pounded, and again, I mean that in a positive way.

First up is the legendary Andraé Crouch, who sings a joyous "Can't Nobody Do Me Like Jesus." And as happens occasionally throughout the show, there are short interview clips of some artists, including Andraé.

Some of my favorite gospel performances are ones that use harmony, such as the Winans, who use four-part vocal inter-weavings on "I Love You." This leads to some very moving moments. However, the group is followed by the Archers (three siblings: Tim, Steve, and Nancye), who seem grossly out of place on this collection. One of the only two white groups here, they're more along the line of televangelist fodder than real gospel. Their sound compared to the rest of the performers represented here is like a Lawrence Welk act at a rock concert. It's just lame.

Luckily, the slate is cleaned off with some black-and-white clips of Mahalia Jackson from an old television show of her performing a couple of songs (separated by an interview), including "When the Saints Go Marching In" (which is revived later in the show).

Back on track, we see Marion Williams (d. 1994), including an interview about her vocal range, followed by the deep-voiced Doug Miller, who has a couple of songs. Repetitions are a key structure with Miller and mightily he praises the Lord.

The Edwin Hawkins Singers evolved into the Walter Hawkins Family, and they do some fine songs that have a bit of a Caribbean feel. They get to do a trio of tunes, including their biggest hit, and one of the first gospel / Top 10 crossovers, "Oh Happy Day." This was actually one of the bigger disappointments for me, as the song is cut short. It's a great song, and I was sorry not to be able to hear the whole *megillah*.

Sandra Crouch and Friends present more iconic gospel, with the choir behind her on "Power in the Blood," on which she shares the spotlight with one of the choir. But on the second tune, "He's Worthy," the singing is split between two members, the first of which is spectacular (no credits are given by name).

With a deep, basso timbre, Walter Phipps (d. 1987) is obviously enjoying sharing his "Choose You Again and Again." His style is mixing some R+B into the sound, as does the next group, the Chambers Family, including parents and (adult) children. Their tune, the appropriate "In My Father's House" is Motown influenced and sounds really strong. This is hardly surprising since a core of the family is the Chambers Brothers, who did the infamous "Time Has Come Today," which was even covered by the Ramones. I'm also fond of a cut by the Brothers of a gospel raver called "I Got It," from a comp album called *Greatest Folk Singers of the 'Sixties*.

The legendary Linda Hopkins is up next. She was in quite a few Broadway shows, and has a powerful voice that lay somewhere between Billie Holiday and Aretha Franklin. She does a bluesy gospel with "The Lord Will Make a Way." She follows this with the classic "Thank You Jesus," which has a bottom rhythm that is reminiscent of Little Richard during *his* gospel phase.

Again breaking with true gospel form, though this time a bit more successfully, is Reba Rambo and Donny McGuire. Their music is almost rock-lite with some funk flourishes. During an interview segment, McGuire says that they are occasionally called "Christian rock" or "Contemporary Christian," though he sees it as "Top 40." Well, they're mild enough to be on Oral Roberts, but they are also among the first successful Christian MOR groups.

Up next to last in the live show is Mel Carter, who was also known for the '60s pop hit "Hold Me, Thrill Me, Kiss Me," but whose roots are in the gospel sector. His style is a bit jazzy, but there is a smattering of a reggae rhythm that creeps in on "Lift Up Jesus."

LeVar takes the lead next in a clip that tells a *very* brief history of gospel as an art form, putting it into a historical context. Just long enough to be interesting, and just short enough not to be distracting.

To end the DVD is a classic-style choir raver by Sandra Crouch and Friends, "Oh Lord, I'm Glad I Found You." One could be standing in a Baptist Church on a Sunday and hear a handclapper (and yes, happily repetitious) like this one. It is also a strong way to end the show.

No, Sweet Honey in the Rock was not represented here, but many of the top performers in the field make their presence felt. While I'm never going to go the way of Jesus, I can appreciate the music for what it is, and the spirit behind it.