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"There's not a minute when I'm not reminded of how good God has been to me. I just want to do his will and share my blessings." — Rev. James Cleveland

Gospel has deep roots in the African-American community. Many of the older spirituals heard today were sang by slaves in the fields. The freedom songs which galvanized the civil rights movement were indicative of the rich tradition of gospel among people of African descent. Gospel music has always served as an inspiration and array of hope for African-Americans, a group of people who have been characteristically oppressed. Over the years, hundreds of artists have emerged who carry on the tradition of gospel music. Famous gospel singers include Grammy Award winners Al Green, the Winans and Shirley Caesar. On Saturday, February 9, 1991, the gospel world mourned the death of the Rev. James Cleveland. Rev. Cleveland is considered the "King of Gospel" because he set a standard for other artists to follow. He dedicated the majority of his life to preservation of gospel music as an art form in the African-American community and throughout the world.

James Cleveland was born on December 5, 1931 on the South Side of Chicago. His father, Ben Cleveland, worked for the Works Progress Administration during the Great Depression. James was educated at Roosevelt University in Chicago but would spend the majority of his life as a singer, composer, arranger and producer. In the December 1984 issue of *Ebony*, he talked about the poverty he faced as a child.

"We had to use whatever color paint the welfare office gave us, and it was either white or beige ... but then I went to wealthy white people's homes, and I'd just stand and stare at the beautiful wall paper and wonder who made the crystal chandeliers sparkle."

Like many other gospel artists, he got his start singing in the church because he came from a very religious family. He attended service regularly with his grandmother at Pilgrim Baptist Church. The director of the church chorus, Thomas Dorsey, guided him during his early years as a singer. Dorsey established the first music publishing house devoted exclusively



My Soul Is Rested

The life of the Reverend James Cleveland (1931-1991)

to the work of black gospel composers. In a interview with *Ebony* in November of 1968, he talked about Thomas Dorsey.

"It was Mr. Dorsey who gave me my first chance to sing in public. I was sort of a mascot for the choir, and I'd sing louder than anybody else."

James joined the church's junior choir, when he was about eight years old. After that, he began teaching himself how to play the piano. He would be a teenager before his family was able to buy a piano for him to practice. Throughout his career, he would be molded by gospel singers in the industry. He idolized Roberta Martin who was a pioneer gospel singer in Chicago community. She guided the Roberta Martin Singers from 1936-1966, which included artists such as Eugene Smith and Myrtle Scott. He would go on to model his early singing style after the Roberta Martin singers. Roberta Martin also owned a gospel music publishing house, which published some of Cleveland's early songs. In 1948, Roberta Martin began to publish his songs at a flat rate of \$40 after he presented the composition, "Grace is Sufficient," at a 1948 Gospel Convention. The composition was developed by The Thorn Gospel Crusaders, which was comprised of teenagers from his neighborhood. The teenage gospel group gave him a chance to gain the attention of Chicago's leading musicians and singers.

In addition to Roberta Martin, James Cleveland was also greatly

influenced by the legendary gospel singer, Mahalia Jackson. James met her many years before she became a famous gospel singer. He talked about how he first met her in the November 1968 issue of *Ebony*. "I was Mahalia's paperboy, and ... I'd leave her paper and then put my ear to the door to try to hear her singing." He said he would sit in her beauty parlor in order to hear her hum songs all day. During the early 1950s, he would go on several concert tours with Mahalia Jackson.

James Cleveland's voice would change over time, which also created problems for him as a gospel singer. As a boy, he sang soprano in the choir and in several musical groups. However, as he grew older, he developed a gruff, rasping baritone voice, which some compared to the great Louis Armstrong. He eventually referred to his singing as sounding like a fog horn. His love for gospel music and singing led to his voice problems. "I sang so hard that I strained my voice. That's why it sounds like a fog horn now." However, the public soon became used to his new sound, which would ring throughout the gospel world for decades.

The beginning of his career was not as glamorous as it would be during his later years. He struggled among other gospel artists to establish himself. In 1948, James Cleveland joined two former members of the Roberta Martin Singers, who formed the group, the Gospelaires. When he was 19, he made his recording debut with the group by singing lead on "Oh

What a Time." The song appeared on disc for the Apollo label and was released in 1950. In 1954, he joined the Caravans, which was created by singer Albertina Walker. He served as a singer, song writer and arranger for the group. It was said that Cleveland's musical arrangements were guaranteed to make you sing. In 1955, he became lead singer of the Caravans, and they would go on to record some of their greatest hits with him. Two of their songs, "Solid Rock" and "Old Time Religion"

have become synonymous with the voice of James Cleveland.

During the late 1950s, James left the Caravans for a short time to join the Gospel All Stars. While with the All Stars, he continued to gain prominence as a gospel recording artist. The group recorded such songs as "Lord Remember Me" and "That's Why I Love Her So." In 1959, he formed his own group, the Gospel Chimes, which included Dorothy Norwood and Claude Timmons. In 1960, he moved to Detroit, Michigan to become musical director of the New Bethel Baptist Church. His work in this church led to his affiliation with other black churches in Detroit. He recorded "The Love of God" with the help of the Voices of Tabernacle, a 100-member choir from the Prayer Tabernacle in Detroit. The song became a hit, which brought him to the attention

of Savoy Record Company. The company was owned by Herman Lubinsky and was headquartered in New York. After Lubinsky persisted, James Cleveland signed with the Savoy company, which marked a turning point in his career. Before Savoy, his recognition had been confined to Chicago and Detroit. However, the songs he recorded at Savoy helped catapult him to national prominence.

After James Cleveland signed with Savoy, he was finished paying his dues. He had been with several groups, but finally he had found a place to consistently showcase his talents. He did not become an instant millionaire, but he was able to earn a living from his songs. Traditionally, artists who pursue gospel music give up the chance to make more money singing R&B music. He also went on to become a licensed minister who headed several church congregations. While at Savoy, he would record 60 albums on the label and establish his place in gospel music history.

The 1960s would mark the decade in which James Cleveland reached superstar status. In 1963, he recorded a live performance with the Angelic Choir of Nutley, N.J. The performance entitled, "Peace Be Still," earned him the nickname the "King of Gospel." The album version of the concert stayed on the charts for over 15 years achieving platinum status (1

million records sold). The year 1963 also saw the start of the James Cleveland Singers, which would help solidify his role in gospel music. He would sing and tour with the group for over 20 years.

During the 1960s, James Cleveland became so popular that his concerts were booked a year in advance, which was extraordinary for a gospel performer. His albums sold so well that he was able to achieve a status of independence as a gospel singer. Most gospel singers are paid specific sales royalties; however, James Cleveland received a guaranteed annual salary from Savoy records. His contract with the company required him to record four albums every year, which was not a lot considering the numerous people he worked with. In addition

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Reflections