

Black Ink

The essence of freedom is understanding

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BSM Gospel Choir—the power that is gospel music

by Tonya V. Smith
Staff Writer

Deep melodic tones, lively rhythm and strong beat accompanied by clapping hands and stamping feet, plus rocking and swaying from side to side, makes up gospel music.

From the "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" of the cotton fields to the "We Shall Overcome" of the church choir stand, to a category awarding an Emmy on the American Music Awards, black gospel music has come a long way.

No other group at the University has done more to promote that music than the Black Student Movement Gospel Choir.

Formed 13 years ago by Francine Rudolf Cummings, the choir has 75 members, including six musicians. Cummings, an active member in her home church and choir, saw the need for such an outlet for blacks on UNC-CH's predominantly white campus.

"Francine organized the choir in response to her desire and the desires of others to sing gospel music," said choir member Robin Thompson. Thompson, who is in his final year of law school, has been in the choir five years.

The choir has since expanded upon Cummings' desire to serve a useful pur-

pose to the University, said choir president Gwen Upchurch. "The choir is an expression of cultural lineage from our forefathers. But personally, as a born-again Christian, I sing to glorify and edify others to know that Christ is Lord."

Upchurch was explicit in noting that the religious feelings she expressed were strictly personal. There's a reason she and other saved or born-again Christian members are reluctant to mention religious feelings they have

about the choir.

During the 1982-1983 academic year, Allan Rossen, a member of an on-campus group of atheists, filed a claim to the Student Supreme Court of the University charging that the choir was a religious group. According to Fletcher Gamble, then president of the choir, the main issue of the case was funding. "The atheist group wasn't being funded because the University doesn't fund religious organizations," said Gamble. "When Rossen went down the list of

funded organizations and saw the BSM Gospel Choir he charged us with being a religious group and said we shouldn't be funded."

The choir won the controversial case and the right to funding. "It was a bad thing because of the conflicts that arose within the choir and the BSM, but it was a necessity," said Gamble. "It solved the issue and ultimately brought the choir closer."

College students getting together to sing is one thing, but recording albums too?

"Going to the City" was the title of the choir's debut album in 1983, and to the city they went. Dressed in berry red robes, the 75 choir members stood atop the steps of the nation's Capitol to pose for their album's cover. On other occasions, the choir has toured churches in Philadelphia, New York and Atlanta.

As one might suppose, a large repertoire is required. "Our gospel music includes many rearranged hymns, old-negro spirituals, contemporary gospel and some original compositions," said musician representative Robin Cox. "It's my job to choose songs, with my co-rep (co-musician representative) and the other musicians. It sounds like a lot



Black Student Movement Choir

photo by Ralph Ward

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The Black Student Movement has a lot to offer



Sibby Anderson, BSM president

photo by Ralph Ward

by Tonya V. Smith
Staff Writer

Since the organization's founding in 1968, the Black Student Movement has helped to increase black awareness at the University through the recruitment of black students and faculty, according to Tonya L. Smith, vice president of the group.

And the BSM has been a vehicle through which black students could express their culture and interact socially, Smith said. "The purpose of the BSM is to enhance black students' stay at the University and to make the University aware that we're here."

The BSM is for black students, Smith said, but many black students complete four years of college without actively

participating in it.

"One freshman (when asked what he thought of the BSM) said it was made up of 'middle-class, uppity niggers,'" said Smith.

BSM President Sibby Anderson said she also encountered this problem. "As a member of the BSM for the past two years, I've gotten a lot of feedback . . . a lot of students think the BSM doesn't have programs directly related to them."

But the BSM has a lot of programs, both Anderson and Smith said.

The Central Committee of the BSM is composed of eleven members who meet weekly to give committee reports and discuss BSM functions.

The BSM has a freshman class committee whose responsibility it is to

serve as a liaison between the freshman class and the BSM. The BSM also has the *Black Ink*, a bi-monthly newspaper, which Cureton Johnson began in 1969, one year after the BSM was founded.

Other BSM subgroups are the Opeyo Dancers, the Ebony Readers Black Onyx Theater and the Gospel Choir. These three subgroups have their own legislative makeups.

The BSM subgroups are vital for its purpose to be fulfilled, Smith said. "They are our best recruitment tool statewide and outside of the state," Smith said.

She said the BSM is a threat to some people. Smith alleged that the State Bureau of Investigation (SBI) tapped the BSM's office phone in 1979 and 1981

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