

Singing a New Song

The Gospel Choir at the University of Mississippi,
a prophetic paradigm of integration.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is documentary field work and oral history undertaken over eighteen months in the life of The University of Mississippi Gospel Choir. The thesis concentrates on three periods in the choir's history:

i) the start of the choir 1974 - 1978; ii) the decision to become a University organization and claim the University's name, 1987-1992; iii) the recording of a CD 1997 - 1999.

The thesis argues that the gospel choir is a prophetic paradigm for the integration of the University of Mississippi. In establishing this it closely examines the issues surrounding the relationship between the administration and the choir and the relationship between the music department's choral program and the choir.

The thesis also examines the choir's impact upon white students at the University and the choir's potential for challenging the prevalent mono-cultural world view among white students.

PREFACE

I joined the University of Mississippi Gospel Choir (UMGC) in the first week of the fall semester, August, 1997. I had been in the United States for two weeks when I walked into the rehearsal room.

I had come to the University as a graduate student, to study the living traditions of African American music, intending to concentrate on blues. I had been a member of a gospel choir in England, and their last exhortations were for me to find myself a church and a choir. I was not prepared for the experience I was to have with UMGC. In those first weeks the choir was eighty strong, and the volume and energy a choir that size can generate is exhilarating.

I was unable to slip in unnoticed. Being white and British made me an ethnic and racial minority of one, everyone else being black and American. Interest in my national background, identifiable by my accent, was heightened by the untimely demise of a certain Princess Diana only a couple of weeks after my arrival.

Attending every concert and rehearsal meant that by the end of the semester I had become established as a choir member, if a novel one. I had a nickname, "cousin Pete" (purposely pronounced with a strong country accent as "cu'dn"), I was occasionally asked to pray with the group during the choir's devotional, and members seemed comfortable enough with me gently to poke fun at my strange pronunciations and stranger sense of rhythm.

My reasons for joining were tied up with my reasons for coming to Mississippi - to experience and study a living tradition. My exposure to gospel music in Britain, and the people who make it, opened my eyes to the power of a living tradition. I envied those who could say, "I make this music because it is our music," as opposed to "I play this

music because it is my personal taste." I feel myself to be disenfranchised from a consistent, living musical tradition, by a culture which lifts the making of music from the reach of many with the insistence that it must be written down and taught by professionals and with the creation of a dichotomy between performer and audience. In joining a gospel choir I am still an outsider to this tradition, yet I am able to be immersed in a music which joins audience and choir, choir and soloist. Most attractive of all is that gospel music can transcend the distinction between performance and worship. The power of the music is the power of religious expression and experience. When things are as they should be, the audience, choir, and musicians "have church" and are united in their praise of God. C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya have described the function of this music as being, "to transcend or to reduce to insignificance those social, cultural, or economic barriers which separate individuals in their secular interests in order that genuine corporate worship might take place."¹

In February 1998, the University of Mississippi Gospel Choir sang in a large Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME) church in Memphis. We were not the main choir of the evening, just the first, and after singing we took our place on the front two rows of pews. The University of Tennessee choir, numbering some sixty persons, took the stand. The choir incorporated complex choreography into their program, and I found myself critically considering the musical arrangements, the competence of the sound engineer, and the appalling acoustics of the building.

By the fourth song the choir members were hitting their stride, no longer perturbed by the poor sound and the two-thirds empty sanctuary. I rose to my feet and swayed with those around me. At times like this one has the choice of being the non-participatory white guy, or the amusingly uncoordinated white guy.

¹ C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham & London: Duke University Press 1990), 347.

As the song ended the band continued to play as members of the congregation and choir raised their hands and eyes with "Hallelujahs" and "Praise You Lords". The choir director addressed the congregation using the standard, well worn and unmemorable exhortations. I have no recollection of the words spoken or sung that evening.

I found my mind and emotions increasingly focused during the first verse of the fifth song, which had a strong slow tempo. The chorus was overwhelming. The choir's voices reached a crescendo, and the harmony crashed into me. I felt an expanding pressure in my chest and a need to shout out and burst into tears.

I did.

Then I fell to my knees.

The emotion was not one I could define, or confine. It was a great joy celebrated, and simultaneously a terrible sadness faced.

My response was personal and spontaneous, yet those around me were being affected. Our choir director was crouching and jerking in a spastic, paroxysmal walk across the front of the sanctuary. Sweat poured down his face and his clenched fists flailed knocking his glasses from his face, sending them ten yards across the floor. He shouted single words of praise, and with each utterance he doubled up as if in pain.

In the choir stand a number of women had stopped singing and were waving their arms and shouting out acclamations of praise. As the song continued two of the sopranos started to scream uncontrollably. Bending, spinning, stamping, shaking, they threatened to knock over their neighbors. Those immediately around them stretched out their arms to prevent the women from hurting themselves or anyone else. The musicians continued to play as members of the choir and congregation disappeared into their own realms of spiritual experience, teary eyes lifted to the ceiling, and arms outstretched, palms raised.

This continued for around twenty more minutes. When everyone had returned to their seats, it was evident that the choir, only a part way into their program, were completely unable to continue. The pastor invited all present to the hall for soul food

prepared by the ladies of the church. The concert had been stopped by an outbreak of Church.

When I told a choir member that I was writing about the events in Memphis, of the time that the choir were so caught up in the Spirit that they were unable to carry on with their program, she said with disinterest, "Oh that happens *all* the time."

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INTRODUCTION

The gospel choir at the University of Mississippi is a prophetic paradigm of integration. Through 25 years of hard work they have demanded recognition and respect from the historically white University and have introduced new dimensions to the prevailing culture of the institution.

The choir creates a black space on campus in rehearsals and concerts, thus nurturing an environment that is psychologically supportive for African American students and culturally challenging for the dominant, monolithic white culture of "Ole Miss."

The phrase *prophetic paradigm of integration* requires some unpacking to understand its usefulness. Integration is a process. In 1962 when James Meredith registered as a student at the University, he de-segregated the school, breaking the legal barriers to his freedom of access to the University, just as public transport, parks, lunch counters, drinking fountains, and high schools ceased to be segregated under law. For many the presence of African Americans on the campus is evidence of what they call integration. This, however, is merely permission to enter into the white world. Unfortunately, all too often this permit of entry is on the understanding that they will not change or challenge that white culture. The history of the University is marked by periods of extreme reaction to African Americans wishing to alter something that is considered a cultural tradition. In 1991, there was a debate over the "integration" of the all-white fraternities and sororities. Lee Eric Smith, the first black editor of the campus newspaper *The Daily Mississippian*, attacked the administration and students for their misappropriation of the term:

America was established on European principles by European people. In this context, integration doesn't mean that we start over again and that each race gets a fair shot at doing this together. It means that all of the other races are supposed to fall in line with the majority. In America and at the University of Mississippi, white people are the majority. That's not integration. That's assimilation.

Webster: "The cultural absorption of a minority group into the body"¹

I use the term *integration* to mean the process by which a minority group gains access, refuses to assimilate and lose its cultural heritage, and demands equal rights for that culture in its new context. The historically white universities of the United States were challenged in a real way to start this process during the 1960's as Black Student Unions appeared on campuses across the country and demands were made for the introduction of black faculty and changes to the Eurocentric curricula. Cheryl Sanders, in her book *Saints in Exile*, establishes university gospel choirs as part of that movement:

Black gospel choirs are found at public and private colleges all over the United States, including those whose student bodies are predominantly white. To designate the proliferation of collegiate gospel choirs as a movement seems appropriate because they emerged as student-initiated organizations during the peak period of black student involvement in public protests, political organizations, and demands for black studies programs and have outlasted many other institutionalized expressions of black awareness among college students.²

The choir at the University of Mississippi fits into the pattern Sanders described, a student initiated group directly linked with the politically active Black Student Union, which has been in continuous existence on the campus since 1974.

The process of integration does not end with the preservation of cultural identity in a new context; the goal is to gain what Bernice King, the daughter of Martin Luther King, calls "mutual respect and exchange."³ In other words: not simply to demand the right to maintain a cultural identity as well as a presence in another's dominant culture,

¹ Lee Eric Smith, "Survival of black frats depends on white frats." *Daily Mississippian*, August 27, 1991, p.2

² Cheryl J. Sanders, *Saints in Exile* (Oxford University Press, New York 1996), 93.

³ Bernice Albertine King, "Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Civil Rights Activist, Father, and Human Being." a lecture delivered at the University of Mississippi, February 28, 1999.

but to effect change upon the dominant culture to the point where your culture is afforded equal value and respect.

The gospel choir is a good paradigm for this process of integration at the University of Mississippi because the culture of the choir is so distinctively African American; nothing like it existed prior to the de-segregation on the campus of Ole Miss. The choir has avoided control and assimilation by the University because of its status as a student organization and the lack of interest exhibited for so many years by the administration. And yet, due to the very nature of being a choir, this group presented its culture to people outside of the membership; from its inception the gospel choir has been involved in cultural exchange through its concert programs.

The prophetic nature of the choir comes from this process of integration being far from complete. I am using the term *prophetic* with a deliberate dual emphasis. In the Old Testament the prophetic tradition was one of declaring the Word of God into a situation, often in a confrontational way. In the words the choir sings, and in the statements it makes, the choir can be seen to be challenging the status quo of Ole Miss. The prophetic tradition found in the New Testament is more profound. The church itself is a prophetic organization, demonstrating the kingdom community as an alternative to the prevailing culture. This prophetic community is to be the lamp on a stand, a visual reminder to the world of God's alternative to the existing social order. The choir, though seldom consciously, is just such a prophetic organization, choosing to incarnate itself in the Eurocentric world of "Ole Miss." The choir, simply through its very existence, points the way to the salvation of the organization through the pursuit of true integration. To be prophetic is to grasp the fundamental truth that there is a destination, but that it has not been reached, and may never be fully attained.

The campus at the University of Mississippi is what I choose to call a white space. The Student Union, for example, is not a neutral space, where there is no dominant ethnic group. In the dining area one is not told by students where their white peers sit, but one

frequently hears that the black students sit over by the food court. This simple example demonstrates the way that white students do not have to consider leaving their comfort zone because they subconsciously believe that everywhere on the campus is white space, their comfort zone.

One of the functions of the choir, which is critical, is that it creates a space on campus that is unequivocally black space. This originated in the need for African American students to have a place in which they could relax and feel supported in the midst of an inhospitable campus. Still fulfilling this function, the black space of the choir is critically important in furthering the cause of integration at the University. For those white students who have been brought up to believe that their comfort zone is and should be boundless, an immersion in the black space of a concert can be an experience that starts to open their mono-cultural eyes. It can open their eyes to a culture that they have grown up with all around them but have never seen, and more significantly to a people that have been invisible to them but who suddenly appear in three dimensions and glorious technicolor.

This thesis is a study of The University of Mississippi Gospel Choir, both an oral history of its development and a documentarian's attempt to record the events he witnessed and the organization he found himself in. The concern in this process is that the views and experiences of the choir members are the dominant voices, that quite apart from my ideas being heard, there is at the end of the process an historical record of the University of Mississippi Gospel Choir in the University library. The stories of people's experience are often too messy, too fragmented, and too complex to fit into a nicely developed model or argument. Rather than choose to ignore these voices I have incorporated them as best I can.

The first two chapters consider two of the critical periods in the development of the choir, its formation as a black space on the campus and its claim on the University name and demand for recognition. Chapters three and four analyze the dynamics of

integration resulting from the choir's continuing success, the choir's relationship with the University's administration, and the choir's interaction with the white music faculty and white student body. Chapters five and six are two pieces of documentary work, the first to record the backgrounds of the choir members and trace how this influences the music performed by the choir, the second to document the significant period of the recording project.

In documenting the history of the recording project, not all of the voices are African American. My own voice, the incongruous voice of a white Englishman, the instigator and executive producer of the project, will be of interest to anyone in the future who wishes to research the gospel choir at the University of Mississippi. The final chapter is my account of the CD project woven into which is an examination of my motivations and reflections on the role of documentarian.

Surprisingly the gospel choir was not considered a significant enough organization to merit a mention in Nadine Cohodas' study of race at the University, *The Band Played Dixie: Race and the Liberal Conscience at Ole Miss*,⁴ nor does David Sansing mention the choir in his official history of the school, *The University of Mississippi: A Sesquicentennial History*.⁵ If the reader is still skeptical regarding the importance of the gospel choir and its place in the story of The University of Mississippi, before you read on consider these words from Bonita Terry Malone, an African American alumna of the University:

The choir and the BSU [Black Student Union] for a long long time was it. Those were the organizations, more or less the umbrella organizations for all black students. Through those organizations unity came about, and that's where a lot of friendships were formed and those friendships exist today. So from an historical

⁴ Nadine Cohodas, *The Band Played Dixie: Race and Liberal Conscience at Ole Miss* (New York: The Free Press, 1997.)

⁵ David Sansing, *The University of Mississippi: A Sesquicentennial History* (University Press of Mississippi, 1999.)

point of view I can't imagine being here as a black student without the choir or the BSU. I just can't imagine it because they were just that important.⁶

⁶ Interview with Bonita Terry Malone 2/2/99

CHAPTER I

SINGING A NEW SONG

The Start of the Black Student Union Gospel Choir

The Black Alumni reunion weekend is a new tradition at the 150 year old University of Mississippi . Attended by around seventy alumni in 1998, the focus of the weekend was the Sunday morning service at the Second Baptist Church in Oxford. Many had come to hear the Black Alumni Reunion Choir, made up of past members of the Black Student Union Choir (which later became the University of Mississippi Gospel Choir). The tradition of gospel music holds an important place in the story of African Americans at the University of Mississippi. Bonita Terry Malone, the organizer of the reunion, explained, "There is not a black alumni reunion without a gospel choir concert, I mean the two just go hand in hand."¹

An oral history of the origins of the choir reveals the significance of the choir for the Alumni. The choir was a community of African American students formed in a socially segregated, often discouraging environment, a community drawing strength and identity from their collective church traditions, a community empowered with a voice to represent a new future for the University of Mississippi.

Forced to integrate by federal ruling in 1962, the University only began to admit African Americans in any significant numbers in the fall of 1968.² Students formed the Black Student Union (BSU) that first semester. On March 25, 1969 the BSU received a charter as a student organization and two days later published demands in the campus newspaper *The Daily Mississippian*, which included the recruitment of black athletes, the employment of black faculty, security officers, administrators and counselors, the

¹ Interview with Bonita Terry Malone 2/2/99

² Cohodas. 168.

appointment of a black chaplain and the addition of courses in black history, civil rights and literature.³ In 1970 there were only around two hundred African American students registered. Though they were starting to see their demands met, most obviously in the beginnings of a Black studies program, the pace of change was too slow for the BSU, who staged a protest in Fulton Chapel on February 25, disrupting a performance of a travelling musical called "Up With People." Despite the protest being peaceful, police arrested 61 students who spent the night in Oxford's jail and Parchman State Penitentiary with eight eventually suspended.⁴

While African Americans were being integrated in the classrooms, little social integration took place with the overwhelming white majority of students. In 1972 *The Spectator*, a publication of the BSU, reported the situation.

Many black students at the University of Mississippi think that they are partially accepted socially. "I feel like I am being prepared academically, but my social life is extremely limited," a female sociology major commented. "It is as though I am being prepared as a partial person"

Because black students do not fit easily into the campus social life, they have formed their own social groups as a means of adjustment.⁵

By 1974, when Linda Redmond, a freshman from Jackson, Mississippi, came to the University, she was one of 316 African Americans.

We African Americans mostly separated ourselves from the majority. It was only in class where most of the time I was maybe the only African American in the class, but after classes were over we all just kinda mingled together all the time, which was not good in a lot of ways, but that's what we did. So it was like high school really because I went to a high school with a majority European American population. So it was a continuation of high school, go to class with them, come home and be with us.⁶

The small number of African Americans, combined with a sense of social isolation, resulted in a vibrant and vital sub-culture forming on campus. Cheryl Weakley,

³ Anne Percy. "The History of the Black Student Union at the University of Mississippi", Unpublished Course Paper, 1993.

⁴ Cohodas, 148.

⁵ "Blacks unsocialized", *The Spectator*, March 1972, p.3.

⁶ Linda Redmond Sanford Taylor interview, 2/11/98.

a contemporary of Linda Redmond, remembers the closeness and solidarity that the students had at that time.

I see somewhat of a difference between being at Ole Miss at that point in time. I had the pleasure of coming back to the University in '88 to '90 to do graduate work. It may have been because I was older and not in the student scene, but it just appeared to me that students were a lot closer when we were at Ole Miss. Maybe it was because Ole Miss was new and we were all dealing with what the media had blown up. A lot of it wasn't what we experienced on the campus. Most of us had really good Ole Miss experiences, we just had those negative racial experiences, a lot of us did. It appears to me to be a bigger thing in the media than when you were living it on campus. We were closer then. Everybody knew everybody.⁷

The seventies were a time of growing confidence for African Americans on the campus as the BSU started experiencing some success in its efforts to make the administration more receptive to its demands. Jerry Christian came to the University in 1971 from Booneville, Mississippi, majoring in psychology and social science. He was an active member of the BSU.

I was very much involved in the Black Student Government. Part of the challenge with the Black Student Government was trying to get some African American representation in the University student government, which was very difficult at the time. And also to recruit Black athletes, which we didn't have when I first went there. I helped recruit Ben Williams and James Reid the first two football players over there.⁸

Christian explains his reasons for choosing the University of Mississippi over another school.

The challenge of changing a predominantly white school. I've always been one that loved a challenge, especially a difficult challenge and that's exactly what that was. And I wanted to get a degree from that University so... that's where I decided to go.

[My family were] very supportive, wanted me to do whatever I felt that was in my best interest.

We're a strong Christian family and we had faith enough to believe that if I went there then God was going to take care of me.⁹

⁷ Cheryl Weakley Turner interview, 4/22/98

⁸ Jerry Christian interview 3/18/98.

⁹ Jerry Christian interview 3/18/98.

For most, however, the main reason for coming to the University was to get a degree unavailable anywhere else in the state. Otis Sanford, Christian's room mate and the president of the BSU from 1974 to 1975, transferred to the University in 1973 from Northwest Community College.

I was a journalism student, and I got a journalism scholarship to go to Ole Miss and that's the reason I was there, I had a journalism scholarship and a chance to write on the campus paper, and that's what I wanted to do. It really wasn't a strange thing for me to decide to do.

There were a lot of issues, I'm certainly not saying there weren't issues when I was there, issues that were adverse to African Americans on that campus, no question about that. And I can certainly talk about those issues, but I can also talk from a very personal standpoint, and from a very personal standpoint I was on the campus for really one purpose and that purpose was to get a journalism degree, that's the only reason I was there at that point.

Certainly I got in the Black Student Union, I got involved in the choir, I got involved in the activities of student life as much as I wanted to. My primary goal was to get a journalism degree because I knew that that was the only way I could get to be a newspaper reporter and that's all I wanted to do.¹⁰

For Weakley it was the courses at the University which led her to choose to come to Oxford, courses that only a few years earlier would not have been available to her in Mississippi.

I was interested in being in Pharmacy and Ole Miss had the only Pharmacy school in the state. [I was] apprehensive mainly about just leaving home and going to college. I guess any college I would have gone to I would have felt probably the same way. Once I got there, there were a number of us in the same type boat I was in and we became real fast friends. I had real good experiences at Ole Miss. I guess that's one reason I remained involved in alumni situations. [I was] just somewhat apprehensive because of the fact that it was my first time away from home, not so much the history of Ole Miss.¹¹

The University met some success in its efforts to recruit African American students and overturn the school's negative image. Linda Redmond was one of the new recruits.

¹⁰ Otis Sanford interview 4/21/98

¹¹ Cheryl Weakley Turner interview, 4/22/98

I was supposed to have been kind of smart back then and Ole Miss invited me to the National Black Achievement Conference, or something to that effect, and they must have known that the way to my heart was through my stomach because they fed us wonderfully those three days. I told my mother, "this is where I want to go." Not to know I was going to be hungry and eat grilled cheeses for four years [laughs.] That's why [I chose to go], the campus was beautiful and the food was good those three days. I didn't have any negative thoughts about it.

I don't know why I was untouched by the reality of what was going on, but I don't remember negativism. I had a good time in school.¹²

At the start of the fall semester 1974 a group of students started a gospel choir, rehearsing in the Y building on the campus. Important for the success of the choir and indicative of its significance was that one of the founder members was Otis Sanford.

Well at the time I was the incoming president of the Black Student Union on campus. We had talked very early, this was my senior year, at the Ole Miss a few of us, Jerry Christian was my room mate at the time, we had talked about wanting to possibly do this. And there was another young lady [Linda Redman] on the campus who was a pianist from Jackson who was strongly interested in doing it also, and we decided it would be a good outlet for students on the campus to possibly form a BSU choir. Because there was a very small African American population on the campus at that time we just started asking around to see if anyone would be interested, and they said "Yeah" and we found a place where we could have our rehearsals and people showed up. We just started doing it, and then after we sort of formed it we started making appearances.

Started out we went to a church in Oxford and soon after that people who were from towns not that far from Oxford. And we just started booking concerts, booking appearances at churches around the area on Sunday afternoon.¹³

Christian remembers the origins of the choir being in a small group which had been meeting.

I got a few people together and we just started singing and sharing together for fellowship, because there wasn't that many of us there. And then the idea hit me to form a gospel choir, and so we started recruiting all of the African Americans on campus that wanted to sing in that gospel choir. That was in 1973 I believe it was.

Well we tried it and you know nobody really showed up, and then we tried it once and we really didn't have... we had a musician but they wasn't the person for the job, and then when Linda came around on the scene I recruited her to be our musician. And me and her really composed the music and got the choir together [and] Otis Sanford, I am trying to think, there were a couple more girls that could really sing, I

¹² Linda Redmond Sanford Taylor interview, 2/11/98.

¹³ Otis Sanford interview 4/21/98

can't remember their names, I can remember their faces. It was about six of us who really started it and then we started recruiting through telephone contacts, in the Student Union building, when we see each other on campus we talk about it and tell them what time. We sent out flyers to different ones trying to recruit in that area. One night we had rehearsal and there was about 10 or 12 of us and then before you know it we ended up with about 30 or 40.¹⁴

As both Sanford and Christian acknowledge, key to the success of the new choir was their recruitment of a musician. Linda Redmond had hardly unpacked and registered for her first classes before she was acting as musical director.

I understand they had attempted to have a choir before I arrived, but for some reason it didn't get off the ground and when they (when I say they, certain key people who thought they were important on campus) heard that I could play they approached me to ask would I do it. And one of them is Jerry Christian who is now a minister with the CME church. I'll just say Chris, we called Jerry Christian, Chris. He was one of them, one of the main ones.

[The choir started by] word of mouth.

"Y'all wanna sing in the choir? We gonna have choir rehearsal on Thursday night."

Well the Black Student Union, which was more active back then, a lot of the members were already in that organization so we just branched off from that.

[There was a] great turn out, probably about 25 I'd say showed up.

[They were] continuing home traditions, as I was. I'm sure a lot of people loved gospel music and at school there was no gospel music I'll say. Even in the Oxford community we had the Redmond Brothers, no relation to me, but they did quartet songs, but there was no gospel music as a lot of us were used to. Second Baptist had hymnal singing mostly.¹⁵

Redmond shaped the new choir musically, drawing from her background growing up in her father's congregation in Jackson.

We thought [the music] was quite current back then. Songs like *Jesus is the Answer for the World Today* by Andrae Crouch and a lot of a group's songs from Jackson, Mississippi, called The Voices of Faith, they had written a lot of material so since I loved The Voices of Faith we did a lot of their material. We used to sing songs like *Talk it Over with Jesus*, *We Will Be Forgiven*. I know today's young people wouldn't have the songs we used to do because my son does not like to hear them today. "Old fashioned" but they were good songs.

We rocked of course and clapped, but we had a lot of saved people I'd say in the choir who were growing. Everyone who's saved is still growing to make it... but we

¹⁴ Jerry Christian interview 3/18/98

¹⁵ Interview with Linda Redmond Sanford Taylor 2/11/98

had a different, I won't say aura, we had God's approval I'll say, and you could hear it in our singing. It wasn't just a good sound, we had a wonderful sound I think, but it was in the sincerity. We weren't there for shape, form or fashion. (I'm thinking about my daddy when I say some things) because we enjoyed lifting up praises.

I was not a musician back then, if we had had someone who really knew how to play we would have been better, but since I was the only one I did what I could, but I really felt like I was inadequate for the job a lot of times because I never, I still don't think I can play. I just sort of wanted to set the record straight. I could not play the piano I needed to have been able to play to lead the choir.

And a lot of the times during concerts I would go blank and couldn't remember the songs, although I think I faked real good, but it was a lot of pressure on me for some reason when I would sit at the piano. Maybe my inadequacy made me forget the music. I could just plonk you know, I plonked.¹⁶

Weakley remembers Redmond as a good musician whose serious approach to music and singing gospel enabled the choir to set high standards, as well as having enjoyable rehearsals.

[Linda Redmond] is very involved in music, I guess from childhood, so she is real serious about it and she wants you to be real serious about it too. She was very good in dividing parts and bringing out the best in you. She was a good choir director, really good. Very committed.

Her commitment, that was her strong point. I guess her weak point was because she was so committed and involved, it bothered her when people weren't as committed or involved as she was. It was sort of a strong point for her and a weak point for her, because she was just so passionate about it.

I remember [the rehearsals] being a lot of fun, I remember it being really exciting. It didn't take on the make up of something just getting started in awkwardness.

We had rehearsals in the Y building and every one just fell together real naturally. Every one was pretty talented I guess, had been in choirs from home, school choirs or church choirs, something like that, Every one pretty naturally divided off into their parts and they were usually good choir rehearsals.¹⁷

Redmond acknowledges that her views on the authority that came with the role of musical director placed a strain on her friendship with Weakley, her room mate. The incident throws light on Redmond's character, the determination and seriousness with which she approached her task.

My roommate, Cheryl Weekley Turner, I put her out of the choir. [laughs.] She didn't want to follow my leadership [laughs.]

¹⁶ Interview with Linda Redmond Sanford Taylor 2/11/98

¹⁷ Cheryl Weakley Turner 4/22/98

She claims I put her out, but it was a mutual agreement that she was not able to follow the leadership so she had to go¹⁸

Weakley elaborates:

Linda and I were room mates, we went to Junior High together, and she began to start the choir and I was interested in being in it and singing. It was almost a natural progression for me with her being my room mate.

It was just real silly. You know I really can't remember the details that much. We had another friend in the choir, Rhonda [who] had a lot of talent. I think she and Linda had a difference as far as the music goes, selection or some kind of way the music was being done. It was carried over into a meeting once, and they were going back and forth at each other about it. Rhonda got up and left so I left with Rhonda, it was real silly. I wanted to go back, and wanted to go back, just had too much pride to do that.

Initially we had our little rounds about it, but Linda and I were always real cool with each other and eventually it just turned into a joke for us.¹⁹

The main reason that the choir proved to be successful was that it was *needed*.

Christian appreciated this fact, and it motivated him to start the choir.

They were interested because you have to understand in 1973 there was nothing on campus for African Americans to participate in except intramural basketball and intramural softball and whatever. We did all of that but basically *that was it*. There was not too much else to participate in because you were not very much part of the athletic department, student government was solely controlled by the anglos on campus. The University was totally run by the anglos on campus so we had to come up with something that we considered was ours. And the Gospel Choir was ours. We started it, we founded it, we made it work. And at the beginning they would not even give transportation for us to travel. We had to use our own cars and everything.²⁰

Redmond reflects on an even deeper need that the choir was meeting. In addition to recreation, she believes that the choir provided a place of psychological and spiritual security, a black space on a white campus.

I thought of how important home training is for youth, children and youth, because I know without us having that background of the church and being as spiritual as we are, it had to come from home, and as I said that was like a continuation of something familiar for us when we got to school and could congregate as a group who had similar Christian beliefs. That was important for us at Ole Miss I'd say, because the majority are so different from us, we needed that home

¹⁸Linda Redmond Sanford Taylor 2/11/98

¹⁹Cheryl Weakley Turner interview 4/22/98

²⁰Jerry Christian interview, 3/18/98

kind of familiarity. Does that make any sense? We needed that experience for sanity. It was a relief every Thursday night [for] everybody, and then you know when we got together I had to always say [screechy voice.] "Be quiet y'all" because they were so happy to be together, you know as a group.²¹

The popularity of the choir shows it was meeting a need. In 1975-76 the choir had 48 members, approximately a sixth of the African American students. Elridge Rose, a freshman in 1975 -76, recalls how in succeeding years numbers would be even higher.

We'd always put out flyers and word of mouth that the choir was going to start practicing on such and such a night, normally we gave the new students a month to adapt to there new surroundings and somewhere about mid September the choir would start meeting. And you would have a rush of students like 75 to 80 students coming in to see what the choir was about. After about mid October we found out those members who were going to be dedicated because that last group, the 75 or 80 members who initially came dropped down to about 50 and those were the dedicated members, and that 50 carried the choir throughout the year.²²

Jerry Christian has fond memories of the choir's closeness at that time.

I remember some of the trips we had together, and if we were coming back late at night we'd stop and eat somewhere and its just great fellowship. Sometime we'd come back and if we were in that area we'd always go out to Sardis, a good way from campus. We'd stop and go out there sometime and just have a picnic. All of us together, it was real nice.²³

The BSU choir was not the only new organization run by African Americans at the University. During the same period black fraternities and sororities were arriving on the campus. White Greek organizations dominated the undergraduate social and political life at the University, remaining white through the prohibitive fees charged members and simply by embracing a tradition of the Old South which held no appeal to African Americans. Omega Psi Phi was the first black fraternity at the University, coming on campus in 1973. Over the next two years Phi Beta Sigma fraternity and the Alpha Kappa Alpha, Zeta Phi Beta and Delta Sigma Theta sororities joined them. Sanford describes the profile of the Greeks at the time the choir was starting

²¹ Linda Redmond Sanford Taylor interview, 2/11/98

²² Elridge Rose interview, 3/20/98

²³ Jerry Christian interview, 3/18/98

They weren't really that important at that point, matter of fact my junior year we only had one fraternity, that was Omega Psi Phi, and I think they had one sorority and then they got another one in my junior year and the senior year I think another fraternity came on campus. People knew who they were but they weren't really that strong, not in my opinion.

We knew who they were because they made a point for people to know who they were because [the way] they dressed and the way people had to go through initiation, rush and all that kind of stuff.

I may be sounding a little biased here because I never joined a fraternity, but it did not have that much of an impact. I think BSU probably had as much impact on campus life as the fraternities did, I think intramural sports had as much impact on campus life as the fraternities did, and the fraternities did have an impact. We'd go to the Greek shows that they had, but there were not enough fraternities to have a serious impact.²⁴

Sanford left the University just as the black Greek organizations were becoming established. Redmond, Weakley and a fellow choir member Lucretia Jones joined the Delta Sigma Theta sorority in 1975; however Weakly agrees with Sanford on the relative importance of the Greeks on campus at that time.

A lot of them were just coming on campus, Linda [Redmond] and I pledged at the same time, we pledged Delta Sigma Theta, we were on the same line in the spring of '75. It had only been there about a year. They were all just coming on campus at that point and they held some importance, but not a great deal because they were all new. I guess the Black Student Union and the Choir were the main thread of commonness that pulled us together more than the fraternities and sororities. Now when the fraternities and sororities came on campus they were exciting and gave us another avenue.²⁵

The high profile of the choir members among the African American students can be seen in the University yearbooks. In the 1976 yearbook Redmond, Jones and Weakley appear as Omega Psi Phi sweethearts (Fig 1.1)

You know what it was just an honorary thing, I think they felt sorry for us when we were on the line. [laughs] because we didn't have to do a thing. I think they thought that first of all we were cute, and it was honorary because we didn't have to do anything.²⁶

²⁴ Otis Sanford interview, 4/21/98

²⁵ Cheryl Weakley Turner interview, 4/22/98

²⁶ Linda Redmond Sanford Taylor 4/21/98

In the 1977 yearbook photograph of the Delta Sigma Theta sorority no fewer than four of the five women were in the choir. As the Greek system gained influence for African American students, the significance of the choir was not lost on its members.

It was like if you were not a member of this fraternal organization you were an outsider. I think that's the way that some of the Greeks saw it. The choir formed a cohesion among all the students as well as the fraternal organizations. When we were in the choir we forgot about our Greek difference, we were just choir members singing the gospel for the Lord.²⁷

As part of the BSU, the choir promoted Black History Week on the campus. In February 1975 Otis Sanford wrote in the campus newspaper *The Daily Mississippian*,

The 1975 edition of Black History week on campus will open Sunday with a gospel concert at 6 pm. in Fulton Chapel.

The famous Voices of Faith from Jackson will appear along with the Voices of Oxford. The Black Student Union Choir is sponsoring the concert and will handle the entire program.²⁸

Fulton Chapel seats 900 and is the University's main auditorium. The concert was given only one semester after the choir started and featured *The Voices of Faith*, Redmond's favorite group. Surprisingly neither she nor Otis Sanford has any recollection of the event. Redmond searched her memory:

²⁷ Elridge Rose interview 3/20/98

²⁸ Otis Sanford, "Black History Week Slated", *Daily Mississippian*, 5 Feb. 1975, 3.

Fig. 1.1 The 1976 Omega Psi Phi Sweethearts



Omega Psi Phi — Lucretia Jones, Linda Redmond, Cheryl Weakley

I can't remember ever performing a concert on campus, I can't. Not until the first reunion, seems like that's the first time we sang on campus, and that is like ten years after I was gone, fifteen years. But, no I can't remember a campus concert.²⁹

There is no doubt that the event took place, as it made an impression on Redmond's sorority sister.

Yeah, I do remember that, the Voices of Faith were there. It was exciting. Just to have the Voices of Faith, they were a big deal then, they preceded the Mississippi Mass Choir. Being from Jackson I knew a lot of them, and a lot of them went into the Mass Choir when it formed. I guess that was just like the seed for the mass choir, but it was real exciting.

I remember it was packed, there were a lot of people there. The churches were very supportive of us, so we had a lot of people there from the churches and those type things.³⁰

This impressive event, while filling Fulton Chapel, drew little attention from the white student body. There was no follow up report in the *Daily Mississippian* and few whites attended. Christian explains:

We started celebrating Black History month and a few [whites] of them came, not many. We would have programs on campus and a few would come. We never did get any recognition in the *Daily Mississippian*, the campus newspaper, they never would do any profiles or articles on the choir.

Well we all knew what the reason was, but they would always say they didn't have the space or that they'd already used up all of their whatever.³¹

Perhaps the lack of memory surrounding concerts on campus is because the University, and the majority of the student body, remained unappreciative of the choir's achievements. The bulk of the choir's performances, and the greatest reception they received, was outside the confines of Ole Miss.

From the first semester of its existence, the choir performed in churches around Mississippi. Initially invited to choir member's home congregations, the leaders quickly realized that they were working to change the University. Young people at these concerts

²⁹ Linda Redmond Sanford Taylor interview, 2/11/98

³⁰ Cheryl Weakley Turner interview 4/22/98

³¹ Jerry Christian interview, 3/18/98

were being shown that it was possible to be a student at the University of Mississippi and be African American. Slowly the University realized the recruitment potential of the choir.

We were promoting the University. It was very positive for the University, because especially at that point in time Ole Miss was having a lot of bad press, earlier at least before we got there, with the flag, and the Meredith thing was relatively recent, but it gave the University [the image] of being progressive, and about the business of having a lot of different avenues for a lot of different people, and being a home for different people. So I think we served as ambassadors for the University. Really I don't know if that was Linda's main thing when she decided to form it, but it really was a mission, one of our goals.³²

The choir came to be an ambassador to the University, that's why I think a lot of students came here, because of the choir. We'd go into different towns singing; Clarksdale, Greenwood, Greenville, Jackson, Gulfport, just around the towns and cities. A lot of students heard the choir and they came here as a result of that. The University finally recognized the choir as an Ambassador, I think it was during the fall of '79, the University finally provided the BSU choir with a bus. So the University would actually charter a bus for the choir to go to the program.

The first trip we took was to Forest City, Arkansas on this chartered bus. It was a big deal because we were accustomed to going in cars.³³

The choir on these trips was primarily performing for an older generation, often their parents. For that generation Ole Miss was the symbol of white privileged Mississippi, one of the potent symbols of what James Silver, one time history professor at the University, called "the Closed Society." The very name "Ole Miss" echoes the social castes and codes of the slave society romanticized by whites. For older generations of African Americans hearing a choir from Ole Miss consisting of their sons, daughters, grandchildren and their friends, must have been poignant.

The trips that we would make to churches in the area, you know we would pool the cars, not all of us had cars but a few of us did, we rode with each other and I just remember going there. We didn't take any money for it, sometimes we got money for some gas, but we certainly didn't charge anything for going and playing and we went to a lot of small churches, sort of out in the countryside.

³² Cheryl Weakley Turner interview, 4/22/98

³³ Elridge Rose interview 3/20/98

I remember that the people who attended the concerts, I think they were more impressed that here was a bunch of black students from Ole Miss of all places, getting together to do this. They were more impressed with that than even probably with our singing abilities. (Our singing was OK, we were a good choir.) I'm not putting us down, but it was just the camaraderie and the fact that we were able to do that on the Ole Miss campus and then take it out to the communities. The black churches in small towns, and the people who came to see us, were so impressed to hear these black kids in the early seventies on the Ole Miss campus, it kind of made them feel a little proud. That's what I remember most.³⁴

These visits to home congregations put parents' minds at ease that their child was making the most of their time at school, that they were continuing in the faith and traditions in which they had been raised. Sanford remembers:

Their parents were probably struggling to put them through school, and we were going back out to those communities to not just sing to them but to show them that your daughters and your sons are doing something that we think is worthwhile, while we are on this campus. We are not all just in fraternities having beer parties, that we are also doing something to give back to the community.³⁵

The choir spent many Sundays on the road, sometimes singing at more than one church in a day. A grueling schedule worked to bring these students close together.

I remember us going around to a lot of the churches, we did a lot of that type thing. There would be some days, I remember one Sunday we sang at Second Baptist and then we left and went somewhere away. To me these places were all far from Oxford. I was from Jackson, so you know those little communities, when I would hear of Aberdeen or whatever, they sounded way far away. Now that I live in this area they're really not.

But I can remember us traveling all day that day and taking our books and studying while we were going, while we were riding in the car. Going about the business, and going to some of these churches, some small, some a little larger. Just traveling around spreading the Word, and the Gospel through song and having fun doing it.

I don't think it was every Sunday, but we did quite a bit. I guess that was what my interest was too. We sung quite a bit, and sometimes like I said it would be at least two different places in a day, in a Sunday at least. At one point we were going quite a bit, but I can't say it was every Sunday because I can remember still going home at least once a month, and those would be times that the choir wasn't really singing.³⁶

³⁴Otis Sanford interview, 4/21/98

³⁵Otis Sanford interview, 4/21/98

³⁶Cheryl Weakley Turner interview, 4/22/98

One of the main problems standing in the way of this traveling was availability of transportation. Cars were scraped together to make up the numbers, and the trips were often not without incident. Rose has very strong and fond memories of the choir's road trips.

We would go in cars, 10 to 12 cars. That's a lot of car to have students any where from 18 to 22 years old traveling in a convoy , anything could happen. We paid dues, like I think it was 50 cents a meeting (we met every Thursday night from 7 to 9) 50 cents wasn't no big deal and that way we'd have enough money to put gas in the cars. Some times you'd have anywhere from 10 to 12 cars, there were a lot of these football players on campus who had cars and they would actually provide us with some transportation for the choir to be going to and fro. Because the football players dated some of the choir members and you had guys like Ben Williams, Eddy Coles, Gary Turner, these guys had cars, they would provide the choir with transportation. You had a lot of students who didn't sing in the choir because they couldn't carry a *tune* in a *bucket* but they still would provide transportation. It was a good feeling being associated with the choir.

The choir was going to somewhere, I think it was Greenwood or someplace. We'd always heard these stories that a highway patrol man or a state trouper could only stop one person for speeding. Now that's not true. One particular incident, it was a convoy of probably about ten cars, back then the speed limit was 55, even on the interstate. I think this convoy was going about 70 miles per hour, it was speeding. This one particular state trooper, he pulled over about three or four cars, and I think the students who were driving protested that, I don't know what happened but three or four students got pulled over for speeding.

The choir had two stipulations when we went off to a church. Greenwood and Clarksdale were like home away from home when it comes to singing and eating. We had a lot of members from Clarksdale, probably like 10 or 12. We would sing at something like 2 different churches in Clarksdale on a Sunday. We had two stipulations, one being food.. soul food, the other being provide us with a little gas money for transportation, often times the church would take up a little public collection to give to the choir. We would always tell them, some of the smaller churches didn't have 40 members so they couldn't take up a big collection, we'd tell them "although you can't give us any money for transportation *you've gotta have food!*" [laughs]

Often times the students would eat all they could, unlike kids today eating hamburger and pizza, we weren't like that we liked *chicken, greens, cornbread, and peas and cobbler*. We were eating real food. So we would eat all we could at this church and turn around and take a plate home [laughs] you were letting the locals know you appreciate their cooking.

We went to a small town 50 miles from here called Blue Mountain, a little small church and I knew a lot of the locals around there. And these are just down home good hearted people, just down home country people, just like Andy Taylor type, just country. So I knew they liked a lot of wild food; rabbits and squirrels and deer

and coons. So one of the local women told me, she said, "Now some folks are gonna bring some coon and possum and you'd better ax what you eatin before you start eatin."

So this was the choir's first time going there and I saw a lot of choir members eating, like 55 going North, and I knew a lot of them were eating possum and raccoon but I didn't say anything to them. [laughs] They don't know to this day they ate coon and possum. It was a good time, a fun time.³⁷

Rose's recollections resonate with the camaraderie of those early choir trips. From his story, and from all the other interviews, one hears that the choir started to change the monolithically white culture of the University of Mississippi. This elicited strong support for the choir from the rest of the African American students on campus. ("It was a good feeling being associated with the choir.")

The success of the Black Student Union Choir was not defined by the white majority nor confined by the parameters of protest. The choir was an expression of the members' culture, one that made the University of Mississippi campus more of a home and helped forge friendships. For those with ears to hear, it was the music of a changing world.

With twenty-four years of hindsight the first directors of the choir reflected on the significance of what they had been involved in.

The fact that we were able to accomplish something as a handful of African Americans on a predominantly white campus that developed some long lasting friendships and relationships that still stand to this day. It was something new, and we saw God at work in it, to help show that African Americans could be an integral part of a predominantly white University. That we were just as intelligent and smart as our white counterparts if not smarter. And we were just determined to make it work, even though we had some setbacks we were determined that it was going to work.³⁸

It was one of the few organized groups where we were able to grow together and then to.. really become like a family... and I was the mother. [laughs] I don't know how Ole Miss would have been without the choir...sometimes I think about how I did help make history you know, hung in there for four years with the choir that tried to start before I got there but for some reason they didn't get it off the ground, and

³⁷ Elridge Rose interview 3/20/98

³⁸ Jerry Christian interview, 3/18/98

when I hear anybody say anything about the BSU choir I wonder, "Do you all know me? I'm your grandmother." [laughs] Anyway, it was a lot of fun, seriousness and a lot of fun.³⁹

³⁹ Linda Redmond Sanford Taylor interview 2/11/98

CHAPTER II

CLAIMING THE NAME

Demanding Recognition from the University

During the 1980's, African Americans on campus continued claiming their place at the University and continued to challenge the exclusive traditions of the school. In the spring semester, 1981, the white student body had to come to terms with John Hawkins, the first African American cheerleader. His refusal to wave the Rebel flag at football games unleashed a storm of media attention, which brought the Klan marching through Oxford. Their photographs, subsequently published in the yearbook, enraged the Black Student Union who threatened to burn their copies. The flag has continued to dominate the passions of letter writers to the *Daily Mississippian* ever since. The eighties drew to a close with another reminder of an ugly past; on the eve of the black fraternity Phi Beta Sigma taking a house on Fraternity Row, an arsonist struck. The University, alumni and Greeks rallied around and helped build a new house, but it was clear that for African Americans, the claiming of the University as their home, with its symbols, was not without its struggle.

Through the end of the seventies and the eighties the Black Student Union Choir continued. As is the nature of any voluntary organization, the vitality of the choir ebbed and flowed, dependent upon the dynamism of the leadership. Glancing through the pages of the *Ole Miss*, the University yearbook, the choir's numbers fluctuate from those of a small ensemble to large chorus. In the fall semester, 1991, *The Black Student Union Choir* decided to change their name to *The University of Mississippi Gospel Choir*. For the choir the decision to claim the name of the University was a move to demand recognition from the administration. A development can be seen between the choir in 1974 and the choir in 1991. For the choir in 1974 the achievement was to be able to

operate at, and from, the University of Mississippi; by 1991 that was no longer enough, and the choir, and its members, wanted to be recognized as a *part* of the University.

Reggie Turner, the choir director in 1991, remembered the importance of the choir in this process:

I think [the choir] really bridged a lot of gaps. And I make that bold declaration because I think that students really felt a part of the University. Although it was [only] a piece of the overall University, it still felt a part of the University. "So yes, this is the place that I can call home, this is the place that I feel like I am making contributions and that I can see some of my work." And I think that that was really important that, you felt a part of what was going on, even though it was a group of black students together, they were still at the University of Mississippi.¹

Reggie Turner was a very active director of the choir, imposing his will and agenda on the group. There is a consensus, sometimes grudging, that through organizing performances and liaising with the administration, he did a great deal to increase the choir's recognition on campus. A native of Holly Springs, Mississippi, Turner came to the University in the fall of 1987 to major in marketing and management. In his time at the school he was very active in student organizations; he was on the Associated Student Board (ASB), president of the BSU, and on the modeling board. In addition he was in the Concert Singers, Men's Glee Club, and in the Chancellor's leadership class. He joined the BSU choir as soon as he arrived at Oxford; he remembers a group of around eight students ready to sing. Turner does not strike one as a man slow in putting himself forward for leadership. Here is his description of what happened:

I have always considered myself a distinguished leader. And when we were first meeting together, nobody knew what was going on. Nobody had any plans or any ideas or anything. And so we were just meeting idly to be honest. And I guess I just started coming to rehearsals with songs, with ideas, with plans, possibilities. And I would always buy music, and I would always introduce new stuff to the choir.

We were an unorganized bunch of people. So one thing, a commitment was asked from each of those people who were really, really serious about making this thing happen. And once that commitment was [made], even if we were four or five in total, we would go on with this four or five. And we scheduled consistent times to

¹ Interview with Reggie Turner, 1/29/99

rehearse, that we would be there on time. So I don't remember how I officially became the leader, but it ended up happening that way, and I ended up being president of the choir.

That role kind of changed a little bit over the years, but I will explain to you what I mean by that. Because when I was president it was almost like I was president, director, [and] organizer over the whole thing. Anything that needed to be done I was doing it. So although I was president I still ended up being organizer, director, conductor of the music and so forth.²

Lloyd Holmes, who joined the choir in 1990, was impressed by the influence Turner had over the choir and the discipline he instilled.

Reggie Turner was very outgoing. When I first joined the choir seemingly Reggie was the president, the business manager. I think a lot of people felt it was Reggie Turner's choir. He was the individual who really worked at improving the choir. The thing that I truly liked about Reggie Turner, if rehearsal was to start at 7 o'clock, he did not care if there were only two people there, it was going to start at 7! If the concert was supposed to start at 7 o'clock, at 7 o'clock it started. He wanted the choir to be really polished. I think the choir has grown. Just as a child, most children crawl before they can walk, I think the choir at that time was in a crawling phase. I think Reggie was trying to get the choir to the walking phase.³

Valerie Harmon was the faculty advisor to the choir, and she offers a more critical assessment of Turner's contribution, again emphasizing time management.

I think Reggie has some assets that facilitated the kind of influence that he had. He is a charismatic individual, which kind of aided in that connection between the white population and the black population and the minorities over all. He is a very stick-to-itive kind of person. If he has an agenda he is going to see it through. He's a very time oriented individual, so if they [had] a time to do something they were going to do it at that time, and they were not going to go three or four hours into something, it is going to be handled professionally. Those things were all qualities that the organization needed to re-vamp its image also. They needed some professionalism and some refining to their group, and I think that that's what he did. I think that was the major asset that he brought with him and that was his influence to the choir.⁴

Mark Kidd became involved with the choir on his arrival in 1991 as assistant dean of students. He was afraid that Turner's forceful style would turn choir members away:

² Interview with Reggie Turner, 1/29/99

³ Interview with Lloyd Holmes, 1/20/99

⁴ Interview with Valerie Harmon, 1/27/99

Reggie was a no nonsense person when it came time for performance and rehearsals. When you came to rehearsal he had his act together, he knew the music he wanted, he knew what he wanted to teach, he was ready to go, point blank. I actually remember a couple of times sitting in rehearsals where I thought, "Reggie you are too tough, I mean you are pushing the students too hard." But the students did it, they did not complain about it, and when they got ready to perform they did a good job.

The choir at that time, it was smaller, and it had its good days and its bad days. Sometimes it seemed like it wasn't going to work out. The fall semester always had a really large group and the spring semester always got smaller. With that and never knowing if we were going to have musicians or not have musicians. Money was always an issue, or the lack there of. So the things that tended to have kept the choir together were strong wills such as Reggie's, because he was bound and determined not to let that group die out, and so he kept it going.⁵

The choir member's memories from that time are very positive. Mineasa Turner found there to be a strong supportive atmosphere in the choir:

The choir was very good. We had a lot of people, we had probably about 30 -35 people in the gospel choir at that time. I mean dedicated people who it wasn't just when we came to choir rehearsal there were 30 - 35 people there and then we when we went to sing somewhere we had 10. It wasn't like that at that time. I guess it was because of the director our choir was under at that time, Reginald Turner, he was a good director and a good motivator. If you weren't doing what you were supposed to be doing, he'd tell you about it. I guess he drew people that way because the choir was under standards. At that time we were having Bible study and that drew the choir closer together. We just seemed to be more like a family.

I can remember my sophomore year, right in the fall in August, my dad had a heart attack, and he had 5 bi-passes. I was in the gospel choir the year before, but as a freshman you kind of feel like your forgotten, you don't feel people really know who you are. But I can remember the choir sent my dad flowers in the hospital, and I can remember that meant so much to me because I was like, "You know they didn't have to do that." I was surprised because they thought enough of me to do that. We were just more close knit during that time, we were more friends. If we had conflict we worked it out, it wasn't, "well I'm just gonna leave." We were all brothers and sisters and we just worked it out.⁶

Harmon recalls that when Reggie took over the choir there had been little emphasis on presenting the choir to the University:

⁵ Interview with Mark Kidd, 2/2/99

⁶ Interview with Mineasa Turner, 1/21/99

I think the aims were very general. I think they were very few, mostly just to sing and spread the gospel where ever they could. The public that they aimed at was mostly small churches. There wasn't a lot of aim at student population, University affiliation. It was mostly black, they were aimed at black people.⁷

Turner had strong motives for pushing the choir towards his vision of excellence.

As president of the Black Student Union, Turner had a clear agenda:

To get black students involved in other aspects of campus life, and make the Black Student Union a reputable organization at the University. By reputable I mean to show that we were just as vital, knowledgeable, strong, willing to work, as any other organization on campus, and not sitting around, doing nothing and looking for a hand out.

We established a lot of subsidiary organizations. We had a drama club and an ebony elegance modeling board, got places on the senate and participation in meetings, and of course we had the gospel choir. I knew that we had some pretty good voices. And I knew that we could make some music, make a difference on the campus.⁸

It is interesting to note the similarities between Turner's agenda and that of Jerry Christian sixteen years earlier (p. 21).

Turner set about trying to move the choir to a better rehearsal room:

We really suffered a lot, especially in the winters, because we used to rehearse in the Y building. It was really cold in there, they didn't have any heat on the bottom floor. The piano was really, really, really raggedy. There were not a lot of keys working on this piano, well put it this way, a lot of them weren't working.

One of the biggest things I had to deal with was procuring a place to rehearse. It took me a while to do that because every place that I went to try and get rehearsal time we were denied for whatever reason. My original attempts were futile.

I don't remember whether I was talking to the wrong people. If I remember correctly Ron Vernon, I don't know if he is still the chairman of the music department there, but I didn't talk to him initially. He was the chairman and I didn't go directly to him. Who ever I spoke with, the secretary or some of the other people in the music department, to try to procure that, I was denied.

[It wasn't until] about two years later, about '89, [that] we went to Meek Hall, upstairs in one of the music rooms.⁹

⁷ Interview with Valerie Harmon, 1/27/99

⁸ Interview with Reggie Turner, 1/29/99

⁹ Interview with Reggie Turner, 1/29/99

This change of rehearsal venue is significant on a number of levels. First, it was a simple improvement in facilities; second, the move from the Y building, home of student religious organizations, to Meek Hall, home of the music department, is indicative of the increasing emphasis on musical professionalism in the choir. The process whereby Turner gained rehearsal space in Meek Hall demonstrates his growing confidence in approaching the administration, and learning the lesson to "go to the top." The room in Meek Hall may have been warmer and had a better piano, but it became increasingly cramped as the choir grew. Mineasa Turner remembers the room's shortcomings:

When I first became a member of the gospel choir we rehearsed in one of the rooms upstairs in Meek Hall. It was actually a class room that had desks in it. Talk about hot and crowded! There was about enough space as far as the directors concerned. There was a table up front, there was a blackboard. There was about enough space for a piano, at that time we had two keyboard players and a bass player. Talk about crowded!¹⁰

After securing rehearsal space Turner was eager to organize concerts for the choir. Turner's memory is that the choir was unable to perform on campus:

First thing I wanted to do was plan a concert and I think I remember, we couldn't have concerts on campus initially either.

We would always have to go off campus to have a concert, I remember that distinctively. We would always have to go to Second Baptist. And I remember dealing with Rev. Waddlington. And between me and Rev. Waddlington and some of the other administrators on campus, we got a room on campus to have a concert, in Meek Hall.

But our first concert was at Second Baptist under my direction. I think the first and the Second Concert was at second Baptist. And mind you we had a concert every semester, it wasn't just once a year, we had a concert every semester.¹¹

It is difficult to piece together the reasons for the choir not performing on campus. When Thomas "Sparky" Reardon, the associate dean of students, was asked about it, he had no memory of a prohibition on the choir's performing on campus, nor could he think of any reason why there should have been:

¹⁰ Interview with Mineasa Turner, 1/21/99

¹¹ Interview with Reggie Turner, 1/29/99

There might have been scheduling problems that Reggie might have encountered, but it has always been my impression that the choir has been performing well over 10 or 15 years here. It was well beyond that. I can remember attending a BSU choir concert in Fulton Chapel as far back as '87. So I don't know what problems Reggie encountered but there has never been a prohibition. There would have always been a group or a person [sponsoring the event] prior to them becoming an officially recognized student organization. So he might have had some problems for just purely a choir concert when it was not sponsored by anybody, but if he had gone to the BSU, which I think at the time the choir was a part, I don't think there would have been any problem there.

I do know that the choir performed in 1987 at the celebration of the 25 year observation of the integration of the University. And I recollect that they performed before that. So I don't know what Reggie's problems were.¹²

The choir, as a student organization, could well have found the organization required to sing at either the education auditorium or Fulton Chapel (the only two suitable venues on campus) difficult. The problems faced by the choir in performing in either of these two halls would have been booking the space. Fulton Chapel is very hard to reserve, as well as paying the attendant costs of tickets, sound and lighting. Second Baptist Church, within walking distance of the campus, was already set up with a sound system, choir stands and Hammond organ. In Turner's mind, what had presumably started as a move of convenience had become a barrier that needed to be broken. With his contacts in the music department, Turner secured the Meek Hall auditorium for the choir's concerts. Valerie Harmon dates the choir's performance in Meek Hall as fall of 1989, soon after becoming the faculty advisor to the choir:

I think the first time I saw them perform was in Meek Hall. And I complained because it was so small and the acoustics in that room are not the best. And they are definitely not that good at the education auditorium. But Meek hall, they did let us use it. I guess that would be the support from the music department. They were kind as far as using their facility. Well Reggie was in the chorus so he had a connection [with the music department] outside the gospel choir.¹³

¹² Interview with "Sparky" Reardon, 2/11/99

¹³ Interview with Valerie Harmon, 1/27/99

Performing on campus was essential to Turner's plan to gain University recognition from the white dominated administration for the choir. He had his sights set at the top:

I always was very involved with the Chancellor at the University. As I was on the Chancellor's task force and member of the chancellor's leadership class and knew everybody who worked in the Lyceum. So my tactic was getting Dr. Turner involved by giving him a personal invitation to each of the concerts, and with sufficient time, because I noticed that the first couple of years that I invited him to the concert he was unable to come because of previous obligations. In my mind I said, "if I can get the Chancellor to buy into this, half of my battle will be over." So what I did was, I started planning concerts (the date) like a year in advance, or at least a semester in advance. And I would give him that date to make sure that he would be there, and I would put him on the program to do the welcome, or the opening remarks or something like that. But what happened was he would always get out of it, and Dr. Trott or some other administrator on campus would actually be the ones to come to the concert to do that.¹⁴

It was not until 1992, Turner's final concert with the choir, that he succeeded in securing the Chancellor's attendance. Turner was not the only person inviting white members of the administration to the concerts, nor was the chancellor the only person who had the capacity to play a significant role in the future relationship between the choir and the University. Dr. Gloria Kellum, then the director of the Speech and Hearing program, was invited to a concert by one of her students:

Somewhere in the early nineties, late eighties, we had in our program a young woman who was singing in the gospel choir in our graduate program in communicative disorders. And so she asked me to come to a concert of the gospel choir which I did. (I thought it was in Meek Hall, but it could have been at education.) And which I was absolutely charmed by the degree of professionalism, and the enthusiasm, and the love for music, and lots of things that this group of students exhibited. That was really the first [time I heard the choir] and it was due to this graduate student in communicative disorders.¹⁵

Valerie Harmon noticed a change in the way the administration viewed the choir:

¹⁴ Interview with Reggie Turner, 1/29/99

¹⁵ Interview with Gloria Kellum 2/9/99

Once people began to see the choir perform, I think the mind set just changed automatically. I think once they came and viewed the performance it was just an over all acceptance and support.¹⁶

With increasing expectations for their performances came a problem of funds. As a subsidiary of the Black Student Union, the choir received no ASB funding in its own right. This lack of finance was hampering the choir's plans to put on a concert in Fulton Chapel, the main venue on campus. Turner summarized the problems:

One of the things we met a lot of the times was just not having given enough advanced notice. Because every time we tried to ask for it, before we could even need a no, they could easily say "it is already booked." Then you had to pay for Fulton Chapel. Pay the people to set up and lighting and so forth. That was another problem because it is not like we had a lot of money.¹⁷

Valerie Harmon felt that, in addition to the financial difficulties presented by performing in Fulton Chapel, there were problems overcoming the preconceptions of those people who managed the hall:

They didn't have any money and Fulton Chapel is a very nice building, but it is an old building, it takes man power there at night when you are performing. Dr. Shollenberger was very nice but he was very specific that he had to have his needs met in order to allow anyone to perform there. So it was a little bit of a struggle to find the money and to let him know we were going to take care of the place while we were in there.

I guess those would be the obstacles, just changing the mind set of people in regard to letting us come and perform and have different things moved in that we needed to have moved in. And the lighting people there, and giving a reason why we needed that much.¹⁸

Harmon in her capacity as advisor felt that the choir had to become a student organization in its own right, and this change would start to address the limitations set by the lack of funds:

I told them one thing they really needed was funding. They didn't have any major source of funding except for dues and what the BSU could give them. The BSU

¹⁶ Interview with Valerie Harmon, 1/27/99

¹⁷ Interview with Reggie Turner, 1/29/99

¹⁸ Interview with Valerie Harmon, 1/27/99

didn't have much funding so it was just really impossible for two organizations to work out of this little budget that the BSU had.

I felt just like all other organizations they should be able to have their own budget. In order to do that they had to be their own organization, which meant they had to branch out from the BSU. Therefore they could ask for money from the ASB and go out as an organization and ask for money from various departments.

They'd also have an agenda about why they were asking for money, and why they were traveling distances, and why they wanted to increase their numbers, and why they wanted to increase their numbers in the choir, and why they wanted robes, and why they needed good instruments, and why they needed money to set up stands in order to perform in the education auditorium. They needed to try to perform in Fulton Chapel; our first performance at Fulton Chapel was once I started advising them.¹⁹

With the decision to become a free-standing organization came the problem of what to call the choir; Black Student Union Choir no longer seemed appropriate. There seems to have been some debate over the new name. Mark Kidd, who as the Assistant Dean of Students eventually registered the choir, remembers the reasons for choosing *The University Of Mississippi Gospel Choir*:

It went from the Black Students Union Choir to, you know, just going back and forth, back and forth in terms of different names. We came up with the University of Mississippi Gospel Choir because we were doing, every trip we went to, every church, every event, not only were we singing praises, but we were also serving a dual role in terms of recruitment for the University. And the choir had always been a big recruiter and retentive factor for students. And it reaches a group of students that may not be reached via other means. So we felt to have that name would make us a more viable part of the University. And also there was the issue of funding as well. If you are carrying the University name maybe that would be more of an opportunity for additional funding. So the name came and it pretty much stuck even when people suggested changing it throughout the past few years. And I was there seven years and there were a couple of times when people wanted to bring changes. But still UMGC stuck.²⁰

The role of the choir as ambassadors for the University in recruiting minority students was not lost upon Reggie Turner:

¹⁹ Interview with Valerie Harmon, 1/27/99

²⁰ Interview with Mark Kidd, 2/2/99

Most of the students who came to the University through the black achievement conference especially were impressed with the choir, and they would always say, "I want to go and sing in that choir."

"I want to go and hear that choir."

When the recruiters would go out on a recruitment, because I used to go out with them to pick up the children. And one of their biggest things was, "Yeah we have the choir." They would always sell the choir, more so than anything else. If a student would ask, "What organizations are there to join once I get to Ole Miss?" The first thing they would say above any organization was the choir.²¹

It is uncertain whose idea it was to change the name to The University of Mississippi Gospel Choir (UMGC), but Reggie Turner saw the strengths and potential in such a name to increase the University's recognition of the choir. He also seems to have claimed it as his own achievements, demonstrating the way he, if no one else, viewed the choir as "Reggie's choir":

I wrote a proposal to the University and talked to [Chancellor] Turner about, because when we would have a black achievement conference, and different events on campus, we had started getting so many invitations and they wanted the choir to perform at so many different things. My concern was because they were calling on us so much, now we got to be so good, and they were calling on us to do things and we were traveling a lot, going on tours and so forth. So I told Dr. Turner first of all you can't say you are a part of campus life and concerned for organizations when you don't ever show up or participate. And it was not something he could argue or that he did argue, so he was very concerned about it. Along [with] my conversations with him like that, and with Dr. Trott, I put together a proposal that the choir be renamed to "The University of Mississippi Gospel Choir." And what this meant was that now they were an official entity of the University with the University's name on it. In my mind, this is what I saw it as, that the University was not going to allow the "University of Mississippi" to be placed on something that they did not have more responsibility to, that they didn't buy into.

See, we always had advisors, but I am not by any means saying that I am so great, I am just telling you the things that we went through, that they never really cared about what we did, how we did it, and who we did it with. They knew that Reggie was over the choir and that if anything needs to happen that Reggie would take care of it.

We had so many different advisors, man! Every year we had a different advisor, because none of them wanted to be advisors. Every one of the black administrators that we asked didn't want to commit the time, and a lot of them had no musical

²¹ Interview with Reggie Turner, 1/29/99

experience, so that was an intimidation factor too; but Valerie Harmon was the one that stuck with us a number of years.

I think I had two or three people that I really talked to a lot about what was happening, what were my plans and so forth. Because most of the people that came to the choir came from a church that did not necessarily have this three part harmony, four part harmony, reading music, having musicians work together, traveling and so forth. They came from churches where they just did things in an unorganized fashion. So whatever we did was more than what they had expected, to tell you the truth, so I never met any resistance from them. And I am not saying that I was smarter than everybody in the choir, but to a large degree that's what it was. Then they didn't want all of the responsibility of having to do all of the things that I was doing. They would much rather just come to rehearsal, learn the song and go home, than to deal with all of the other aspects.²²

Valerie Harmon quickly found out that attributing your organization with the name of the University was not as straightforward as she first thought:

Taking the University name and using it, I didn't know it was as major as it is if you are a University organization. We had to get board approval, the I.H.L. board. That's the Institutions of Higher Learning, in Jackson. That's the board that makes all the decisions budget wise for the University, major hirings like the chancellors appointment and any other major decisions of any of the major institutions in Mississippi have to go before the board. You submit a proposal to the board on a specific little piece of paper and they review these during the board meetings and approve them or disapprove them.

I didn't know that, and of course that was brought to my attention real quickly. The Chancellor's office heard about it and, as a matter of fact Dr. Wyatt, who was then executive assistant to the Chancellor, called me and told me we had to submit it to the board, and asking my reasons. They were supportive once we kind of really put it on the table and talked about reasons. But they didn't really see a purpose in it at first, we had to make them understand the purpose. The purpose was just that this was a choir who was going out representing the University every time it went anywhere, in my opinion, and it was a major recruiting tool for African American students. I don't think anyone realized it at that time, how many students actually just came here because they saw the choir perform and wanted to be a part of the choir.²³

From the detail of Harmon's memory of the bureaucracy involved in the change of name it seems that she was far more involved in the process than Turner would seem to give her credit. The Chancellor's office has lost copies of the minutes of the I.H.L. board meetings for fall 1991, and the office in Jackson has no records of a gospel choir ever

²² Interview with Reggie Turner, 1/29/99

²³ Interview with Valerie Harmon, 1/27/99

being discussed in a meeting. An application may have been filed, but as there are no records, the board probably did not consider it an I.H.L. affair and so it would have been returned for the University of Mississippi to decide. If the latter is the case, and it seems in little doubt given Harmon's memory of the paperwork, then it would appear that the University was very cautious in its decision to allow the choir its name.

The actual date of the name change seems to have been in October 1991. The first time the choir is given the name in any document is on the front page of the *Daily Mississippian*, on October 14, as part of a caption underneath a photograph of the choir singing at Oxford High School. In the Annual Report of the University it is simply noted that, "The University of Mississippi Gospel Choir petitioned and were approved by the Committee for official recognition as a campus organization."²⁴

The reasons for claiming the University's name appear to be clear. The University would benefit in terms of recruitment, and more significantly, the choir members thought they would benefit, believing the administration would find the choir harder to ignore with the University's own name and reputation connected to it. In a way they were forcing the University to take notice and have a stake in the success of the choir.

A possible third reason for the name change is less tangible. Certainly some of the choir felt that the name Black Student Union Choir was too exclusive. There was debate at the time of the name change, and some African Americans on campus wondered if the choir was giving up its black identity. Lloyd Holmes is adamant that the name change was not to enable the choir to assimilate with the University's white culture:

Some people felt that maybe the University was trying to take away from the Black Student Union, but that wasn't it at all. Because the gospel choir is spiritually based we felt that anyone should be able to come in and sing gospel music. What we did not want was the choir to lose its focus, or to lose the fact that it would focus on the music found primarily in the African American community. If you ask most

²⁴ Mark A. Kidd,, "Committee on Student Organizations", *Annual Report of the University of Mississippi, July 1, 1991 - June 30, 1992*, Vol 1, p.699.

people when they think of gospel music what do they think about? The majority of people would not tell you they think of opera or they think of classical music. They are going to tell you they think of the religious music found in the African American community. We weren't trying to change who we were.²⁵

In an interview given in 1991, Turner walks a similar tight rope between maintaining the choir's African American identity and being an open organization. A white student, Jean Larroux, had joined the choir just before the name change came into effect. Turner was very careful to point out that the name change had not been prompted by the possibility of recruiting whites; instead the name change is laying claim to the status of being, "The only official gospel choir on campus." However only five lines later he states that, "Although the Black Student Union Choir is a separate organization, we don't advocate segregation."²⁶

Turner and the choir wished to break down racial barriers and see their audiences become more diverse. The belief was that with the change from the *BSU* to the *University* choir, concerts would attract people from the whole University community. Harmon remembers the change in the audiences on campus which she partially attributes to the name change.

From the beginning [the audience] was black, and pretty much black only. Sometimes you'd see some white students. No white students in the choir of course at all. As time progressed, the name change took effect, their visibility increased and you started to see a much more diverse audience, much larger audience. You started to have a higher demand, in my opinion, for the choir to perform at different functions. I would call the Chancellor's office asking the choir to perform before the name change. But [after the change] the Chancellor's office personnel came to the choir's concerts and comment, often if I was in the rest room or in the hall way, about how much they had enjoyed it. They welcomed the director in their office personally. He would go bye and visit and say hello. Just the whole mind set and acceptance of the group, and not only the group but individuals in the group changed based on all the changes I think.²⁷

²⁵ Interview with Lloyd Holmes, 1/20/99

²⁶ Jesse Holland, "Desire to sing prompts white to join black choir", *Oxford Eagle*, 10/1/91. p.1.

²⁷ Interview with Valerie Harmon, 1/27/99

At the same time as seeing the significance of the name change in altering some perceptions of the choir among whites on campus, it is crucial to appreciate the amount of hard work the choir put in to attain their high standards; the heightened profile of the choir at the University was no semantic conjuring. Even with the status of a University organization the achievement of having a successful concert in Fulton Chapel should not

Fig 2.1 The University Of Mississippi Gospel Choir as they appeared in the 1992, yearbook, *Ole Miss* . The yearbook staff incorrectly use the old name.

In the top picture Reggie Turner is third from left. Lloyd Holmes is far right.

Mineasa Turner is the fifth from left in the bottom picture.

Black Student Union Choir



be underestimated. The hall seats 900 people, and even allowing for exaggeration, when The University of Mississippi Gospel Choir sang there on April 8, 1992, the building was respectably full. The concert was Reggie Turner's swan song. An article in the *Daily Mississippian* noted Turner's departure as well as including a semantically confusing acknowledgement of the recent name change:

"The program is going to be very special," Yates [Alvin Yates, choir president] said. "This is Reggie Turner's last concert and many of our senior choir members will be graduating."

Formerly the Black Student Union Gospel Choir, the choir has existed for about 20 years. Last semester the choir became an entity of Ole Miss.²⁸

Both Turner and Harmon consider this concert the high point of their involvement with the choir. In his memories of the night Turner recalls some of the details that took so much work:

[The audience] was local churches, a lot of the administrators, because I sent invitations to every one that I knew personally on the administrative staff. Dr. Turner was there, Dr. Trott was there.

By this time here again we were soaring. It was like 50 - 60 people in the choir and we all had uniforms. We didn't have choir robes at that point because every time I submitted for choir robes it was denied. So rather than having choir robes, every year we would go out and look in a catalogue and spend time ordering materials.²⁹

Harmon is a little more poetic:

Seeing them perform in Fulton Chapel was just like having a baby. It is like giving them new birth, to a group of young individuals who deserved it a long time ago and who were just now getting it. Understanding that everything takes time in this area of the world, and you just have to be diligent in our pursuits and we can accomplish that.³⁰

This strong memory of a concert on campus in Fulton Chapel contrasts with the memories of the first choir. For the choir of Christian, Redman, and Sanford their fond recollections are of concerts in the community; they barely remembered their concert in

²⁸ Deborah Purnell, "UM Gospel Choir to present concert," *Daily Mississippian*, April 6, 1992, p.6.

²⁹ Interview with Reggie Turner, 1/29/99

³⁰ Interview with Valerie Harmon, 1/27/99

Fulton Chapel in February 1975. In a literal and metaphorical sense the choir was an organization in the midst of Ole Miss that transported its members out of that environment and connected them with the church traditions they had grown up with. By 1992 the focus had shifted, with both Harmon and Turner believing the choir deserved support and recognition from the institution of which the choir was a part. The emphasis on the administration's attendance was not prompted by a need for white approval, but was a measure of the choir's success in demanding recognition for its achievements in their own terms. In an institution where African American students are always having to enter into the white world on white terms, the significance of powerful whites voluntarily entering the black space of a gospel concert, and valuing the experience, should not be underestimated. Put from the choir's perspective: *We* didn't go to sing for *them*, *they* came to hear *us*.

CHAPTER III

BE GRATEFUL.

The Relationship Between the University and the Choir

The University of Mississippi Gospel Choir is, at the time of writing, enjoying an unprecedented relationship with the University's administration. The school's Sesquicentennial celebration coincided for the choir with good musical direction, committed faculty advisors and the opportunity to record an album. The choir was invited to sing at two of the most significant events in the 1998 University calendar, the dedication of the new Honors College and the Sesquicentennial convocation. For the choir these events paled beside the news that Malaco, the largest independent rhythm and blues, and gospel label, was to sign a contract to release the album recorded that April. These achievements had been made with the assistance of the University, but not at their instigation. The choir had come a long way in its relationship with the University: in 1974 the choir requested the use of a room in which to practice; in 1998 they requested the use of the University's attorney to negotiate a commercial record contract.

Those who had been involved with the choir over the years saw the latest successes as a culmination of years of work. Valerie Harmon, who had worked for the choir to gain student organization status, appreciated that the opportunities now enjoyed had not been easily won:

I think that the changes throughout the past several years have facilitated all these opportunities. You know I think opportunity is about preparation. I think that over the past several years the choir has been preparing themselves for bigger opportunities, and so they are now reaping the benefits of good preparation and diligent work and commitment. I am real proud of them though I am not very involved with them any more. They have great advisors now. I think that the opportunities that they have been given were well deserved. I don't think anything was given to them because it should be given, I think that they were well earned and

deserved opportunities. I just look forward to even greater things happening in the future.¹

Bonita Terry Malone of the Alumni Association has worked for years to publicize the achievements of African Americans at the University. She tried to recall any other African American student group that had received as much attention.

Other than Phi Beta Sigma fraternity, and the exposure they got with moving onto fraternity row, and there were some problems with their house, like it got burned down to the ground, that brought a lot of attention, but it turned out very positive, I can not recall another [African American] group with the kind of success and the positiveness. There is nothing negative about the choir, nothing. The history is great, the experiences have been great, I think the transition from Black Student Union Choir to University of Mississippi Gospel Choir was on time, and that is great and its working out. Now with this CD project it is just growing and growing and growing, and I think that it is the prime example of how the University wants things to be. So other than Phi Beta Sigma and all of the things that went on with them, I haven't known of another group that has had the success that the choir has had.²

The University not only supported the recording project through grants from a number of departmental budgets, but also both the Alumni Association and the University Foundation have helped secure funding. These developments raise questions: why did it take the choir 25 years to receive this level of recognition? What does the University hope to gain from promoting the choir? Will the autonomy of the choir be threatened by University involvement?

The Sesquicentennial committee, specifically Gloria Kellum and Brian Reithal, proved invaluable in helping the choir towards its goal of recording. I initially approached Gloria Kellum after being told that the Sesquicentennial committee held the only discretionary budget on campus. With their assistance the choir planned the recording and found the funding. Kellum, now the interim Vice Chancellor for University Relations, considers that the Sesquicentennial event opened up opportunities for the

¹ Interview with Valerie Harmon 1/27/99

² Interview with Bonita Terry Malone 2/2/99

choir. She gave me an exhaustive answer to the question of why it was decided to support UMGC:

When I took over as the director of the Sesquicentennial we involved the whole community in what we were going to do as a celebration. So in 1994 when this began, the first year was really spent, "What do you want to do? What are the things you think we ought to do?"

And while we were planning on what we were going to do at the Sesquicentennial, we were also talking about what the University should be doing in general. And out of that came all kinds of input from many different dimension, and one persons input was, "The gospel choir is wonderful, lets have them as a part of the Sesquicentennial." And so as we began to reach out to do events we began to want to utilize the gospel choir as an example of a student organization, music, excellence, all kinds of things at the University. And so I would have to believe that it would have to be the Sesquicentennial that first kind of began to put them in a limelight from the point of view of things that I might be doing, or that our office was doing.

This University is about students, it is the essence of it. And so when students are interested in an area, when they work hard to provide excellence in an area; and I don't care whether it is on the soccer field or in Tennis or in the Computer lab or singing or playing in a band or whatever it is, I think the University has an obligation to support them in their efforts. And when you see a student group that not only is striving to produce beautiful music, but are obviously working hard to do that, but obviously loving what they do, loving the opportunity to have new people in their lives. Because I have to say that the gospel choir brings together individuals at the University who might not ordinarily be together.

I thought that their degree of excellence considering their limited resources was extraordinary. The Sesquicentennial was an opportunity for the University to look at itself, to evaluate, to plan, a lot of things and to develop resources. So the gospel choir kind of fit right in there because it was something that obviously had history to it, had been important to our students. I think it was a recruiting tool. I believe students were coming here because their friends were in the gospel choir. So it becomes something that the essence of a student of coming to the University, having reason to come, having a group once they get here. And I don't care whether that group is the band or the gospel choir or Kappa Delta sorority or whatever it is, but it is a group, and that's very important in the development of people in the Universities, particularly undergraduates I think.

So in my opinion during the Sesquicentennial we found the gospel choir, they found us, both. And so the gospel choir became one of those things that was just a shining star at this University. It was something that was wonderful in so many dimensions that it deserved to be polished, it deserved to be center stage.

So I look at the gospel choir as an evolving entity that is very important to the students and to the University. And I think the Sesquicentennial was one of those

times in the life of an institution where things like that could blossom and could get attention because we were looking at ourselves.³

For those choir members with longer memories of administrative apathy this sudden conversion to the gospel choir raises as much suspicion as it does gratitude. Mineasa Turner, now the assistant director of the choir, joined the choir when it was still part of the BSU; she recognizes the changes but suggests that the University may be reacting to attention UMGC is gaining outside of the University.

Whenever I come to programs like the Honors College, and like the Sesquicentennial Celebration and I look on the program and I see Concert Singers and the gospel choir on the same program, that surprises me. The gospel choir has been in existence since 1974, so it didn't take from 1974 until 1998 for them to realise that the gospel choir is good, OK?, and that we are worth presenting to people other than just the Black Student Union, to people other than just the Mississippi Achievement Conference and places where you are going to have mostly minorities in the audience. It has taken a lot of blood, sweat and tears over the years to make us who we are now. We are just a product of all the work that has been put into it over the years. It hasn't just happened this year that the gospel choir has been good.

Here in the last three years I do think we have gotten more respect, and especially since the CD project came about. I think they realized, "Hey, here is a group right here at our University, and Malaco from out of Jackson knows about them, the Associates from out of Memphis knows about the University of Mississippi gospel choir, and they are right here under our nose. I think we might ought to pay a little closer attention to these folks and just go out and see what they are doing."

And that also has a lot to do with who your leaders are in the choir, who is promoting your choir here on campus. So I am not going to put all of the emphasis on, and put all of the blame that the University hasn't taken notice of the good work that the Gospel Choir has done down through the years. I think that also the blame can be based on both sides.⁴

There is more than an element of truth in Mineasa Turner's observation. The offer of recording facilities at cost from Malaco records did initiate the recording project for the choir; however Kellum had already been involving the choir in Sesquicentennial events. In September 1997 the choir sang at the celebration of 150 years of religious life at the University.

³ Interview with Gloria Kellum 2/9/99

⁴ Interview with Mineasa Turner, 1/21/99

The issue of race intrudes upon the question of the motivation for the new found support for the choir. Kellum is excruciatingly careful to stress that no money came the choir's way because the members are predominantly African Americans:

I will have to tell you this, that in my opinion the aspect of the choir was not one of race. The aspect of the choir is one of a student group who worked very hard to achieve something very positive called music. Now the fact that many of those students are black is important because in fact it is the genesis of why it was created right? So it is a very important entity. I think it is a cultural aspect that is extremely important for all of our students to know and understand.

So I truly believe it rises above the level of "here is a bunch of black students doing something nice for the University." That was not it at all. In fact I am almost wounded by that.⁵

Kellum is understandably concerned that the choir's efforts are not devalued by accusations of reverse discrimination and affirmative action. This does nothing to allay any questions that individual choir members might have; they do not need convincing of how hard they worked to reach this point. For them the question, "Why now?" develops different racial overtones. During 1998 the choir has had an unprecedented number of whites in its ranks, with four singing on the recording. This led Ethel Young Minor, an English professor and choir advisor, to voice her concerns:

One thing that I regret that I think that [having whites in the choir] does, which many of the students appreciate, is that it seems to validate the whole purpose of the choir with the University. The fact that white people are in it makes it O.K. and makes it worthy of even more University support. And I find that problematic. I feel like if white people never came to a concert, if they never cared about what we did, if they wrote articles in the paper about it every day that were negative, that should not determine the value of the institution. But it certainly does add to the value of the choir and that is the honest reality.

It makes people take it a lot more seriously and say they are doing more than just screaming and shouting and acting black. Most of the students really appreciate that and they want it to become even more diverse. For me it is dangerous because it is the same thing that we have been told for over 200 years, that the more white you become the more valuable you are, even in terms of our perceptions of skin color. The lighter you are the more valuable you are, the more European your approach to

⁵ Interview with Gloria Kellum 2/9/99

language is, everything is validated by a type of European ethos. So I do find it somewhat problematic, but I do appreciate it at the same time.⁶

As Ethel Young Minor stated, this is a view held by choir members. Soon after the recording Chris Ware, whose photographs appear later in this thesis, reflected on the implications for the choir of white members.

Me personally I like to see the choir get this much more diverse. I think us being more multi cultural we go a lot more attention from the campus media, from staff and faculty and students alike. They thought "hmm, that black choir ain't all black."

I would like to say [we got more attention] because we were just that good, but a lot of people wouldn't listen, a lot of people were set in their ways. They wouldn't go and listen to a gospel choir, especially here in Oxford, on the University campus unless they were into that type of music. But when we started getting other races of people in the choir they started helping promote the choir.⁷

This line of argument is impossible to refute; no control group enables one to say what would have happened in the absence of white participation. There are indicators, however, that the University is very happy to acknowledge the presence of non-blacks in the choir. The Sesquicentennial edition of the *Alumni Review* had a cover photograph of the whole choir (Fig 3.1), and in the inside is a close up of ten choir members, with the two Caucasian basses the center of the shot.⁸ (Fig 3.2) The editorial decision was taken to show the choir as including whites. Kellum in her praises of UMGC mentions her pleasure at seeing the ethnic diversity.

Just as I see [the choir] primarily as an African American group, I now see some Caucasians as a part of that group. I am delighted for that. I would hope that all of our student groups would represent all races. And that will come with time because the diversification of this University has a long history and I truly believe that that will develop over time.⁹

To find that the choir's membership is starting to coincide with Kellum's long-term vision for the University is not the same as proving white involvement has increased

⁶ Interview with Ethel Young Minor 2/11/99

⁷ Interview with Chris Ware, 5/11/98

⁸ Robert Jordan, "The Ole Miss Choir warmed up...", *Ole Miss Alumni Review*, Vol. 47, No. 4, Winter 1998, p.28.

⁹ Interview with Gloria Kellum 2/9/99

the value of the choir in the eyes of the administration. It is, of course, not just the administration that judges the value of the choir. The sense that the choir is appreciated more with white members can also emanate from the white student body. For the casual white observer, to see some faces which are as pink as their own in the choir's ranks is comforting. From a simplistic understanding of race and integration this token presence of whites is a "nice" thing, possibly a reassurance that blacks can be accepting of white folks after all. Just such a sentiment pervaded a platitudinous article recently published in the *Daily Mississippian*:

What ... touched me, was that the Gospel choir, which is traditionally all black, had three white members. It made the song *so much more beautiful*, that it was the collective production of two of the South's most historically combative races. It was an uplifting experience, and it left me with a warm feeling of hope for racial harmony at Ole Miss.¹⁰

The suspicion that the University values the choir more now that it has a visible white component, while being uncomfortable both for the whites in the choir and for the administration, is very difficult to refute and certainly not irrational or unfounded. How the choir looks to the world outside Ole Miss is suddenly a concern for the administration. When the CD is released, the album will receive national distribution, air-play, and publicity. Valerie Harmon is watching the University closely:

If the CD has any kind of market value, if it starts to be nationally known, it will be interesting to me to see how the University begins to embrace the group, because it is nationally going to put that name out there.

And it would be interesting to see what the University would have done if the name wasn't "The University Gospel Choir", if they had produced a CD and they were still a Black Student Union Choir, what would the changes be?¹¹

The choir's success and anticipated exposure is an incredible opportunity for Chancellor Khyatt and his administration as they strive to change the image of the

¹⁰ Josh Miller, "Racial Harmony Takes Individual Sacrifice." *Daily Mississippian*, February 26, 1999. p.2.

¹¹ Interview with Valerie Harmon 1/27/99

University from that of racist party school, to "one of America's great public universities."¹² The perception of the University in the nation is linked to the number of minority students enrolled, currently disproportionately low when compared with Mississippi's racial constituencies. There are only 935 African American undergraduate

Fig. 3.1 The choir on the cover of the Alumni review, singing at the Sesquicentennial Convocation

¹² Tina H. Hahn, "Commitment to Excellence", *Ole Miss Alumni Review*, Vol. 47, No. 4, Winter 1998, p.27.

Commemorative Issue: Special Sesquicentennial Edition

Ole Miss

ALUMNI REVIEW

1998

**THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI
CELEBRATES 150 YEARS
OF EXCELLENCE
IN HIGHER EDUCATION**



Fig. 3.2 The photograph that appeared in the *Alumni Review* presenting the face of diversity



students in a total undergraduate population of 8712.¹³ This is a 10.73% compared to 40% African American population in Mississippi. Kellum feels that diversity is not only an essential image to portray, but is also an essential part of the University experience:

I look at it as a University that wants to present as diverse a picture of the world as it possibly can. Not so people will look at them better, I am not talking about that, but as a University. When you say University to me you imply diversity. it is like I told some kids last night in Tupelo, I mean they are from Lee county Mississippi. If they go to the University of Mississippi there will be a student from every county, every state and 60 countries, that's what a university is all about.¹⁴

This white perception of the diversity on the Ole Miss campus is in contrast to the perception of minorities. Mark Kidd, Assistant Dean of Students from 1991 to 1998 described how students can feel:

For all students, but particularly minority students, the University is very very traditional, you have a lot of students who are very much alike in terms of their backgrounds. The University is fairly conservative so sometimes the African American might not always feel like that's the surrounding or environment that they are most comfortable with. You have a very large percentage of students who are in Greek letter organizations, and again there is some perceptual thing that if you don't belong to one of those organizations you're, I won't say an outcast, but there is not anywhere else that you can fit.¹⁵

For an African American on a predominantly white campus the experience can be uncomfortable. This discomfort, and the reputation of the University as a racist institution among African Americans in Mississippi, combine to keep minority recruiting figures low. Kidd explained the pressures faced by students who decide to go to the University of Mississippi:

I think those students who chose to come to the University still have to deal a good bit with persons who are not familiar with the University wondering, "Why did you go there." There is still that outside perception there that, "You go over there you're gonna get hung from the closest tree," or some kind of crazy stuff like that. It

¹³ Figures for Fall semester 1998 from Student Statistical Profile, supplied by Department of Institutional Research, University of Mississippi.

¹⁴ Interview with Gloria Kellum 2/9/99

¹⁵ Interview with Mark Kidd 2/2/99

is a real perception that is out there for whatever reason. Often times people refer to the University as "Ole Miss" as opposed to the University of Mississippi, and that name in itself in some people's minds still drives that negative perceptions. You know they think of *Old Mississippi*, really that in itself is an issue that is facing students.

I think some individuals are really surprised that an African American is working at this institution as an assistant dean. I think some people in my community are surprised that African Americans can come to this institution and do well. Quite often still you'll hear, "I am not going to Ole Miss because that's a racist institution, they don't want us there."¹⁶

Tiffani Norman, president of the choir since January 1998, discovered that many African Americans were surprised to learn that an historically white institution like "Ole Miss" would even have a black gospel choir.

If I went home and told most of my friends I was in a gospel choir, well even friends here at the University. I tell them I'm in a gospel choir and I'm like, "You all coming to the concert?" and they were like, "Na" and because they think it is a white choir and that they'll do all this operatic, they think it was a white choir getting ready to sing gospel music. And when they ask, and I tell them it's all black choir, "Oh yeah I'm gettin my ticket." You know, "I'm there, I'm first in line." And I'm like, a lot of people don't [know], they'll be shocked. I guess with the tradition that this school has as far as racial tension and all that stuff they are really shocked that they have a gospel choir¹⁷

The choir since its start has worked hard to try and dispel misperceptions about the University and demonstrate that one can be a successful African American student at the University of Mississippi. Bonita Terry Malone has watched the choir's reception over the years:

The choir is out there, going into different churches and the choir is very popular in the community and the choir is well respected. When you hear the University of Mississippi Gospel Choir, people perk up because they know they are fixing to hear something great. And the choir transcends all of that other *crap* that's in the gap, in that gap between the University and the community. I think that the choir has served that purpose very well and will continue to do that with even more visibility.¹⁸

¹⁶ Interview with Mark Kidd 2/2/99

¹⁷ Interview with Tiffani Norman, 11/22/97

¹⁸ Interview with Bonita Terry Malone 2/2/99

The University is making a concerted and coordinated effort to change the public perception of the institution. Bonita Terry Malone explained how this policy over image influenced the decision to feature the gospel choir in the *Alumni Review*:

From the alumni standpoint, efforts started being made to change the image and doing whatever was needed to show that it is not all about the flag, it is not all about Dixie and that sort of thing. We support other things. And I think that had a lot to do with my emphasis being changed, we want to show that we care about the choir, we support the choir. And so that is why you saw the choir on the cover of the Alumni review.

I think that's my purpose to as an African American, I can't forget basically what I am and who I am, regardless of the environment. I think that I am an asset to them, to make sure they understand it is necessary when black alums get that magazine, they need to open it and see somebody who looks like them. Give them something that makes them want to read. Give the students something to make them want to get it when they get out of school. So I have always tried to encourage them to have more visibility for black alums, like students or whatever.¹⁹

The choir are whole hearted supporters of this new "Ole Miss" image. They do not wish to be ridiculed and harassed by their peers for attending the University of Mississippi, and this translates into a willingness to act as recruiters for the school. In doing this, Ethel Young Minor sees the choir almost as the antithesis of the old "Ole Miss" spirit:

Our students really want to be messengers for the University. I don't know if you remember the conversation at the beginning [of the Fall semester 1997], they're like, "We want to go out and we want to sing and we want to recruit for Ole Miss." And so they really have an Ole Miss spirit that's interesting to see that's kinda like...it serves as an appositional discourse to the Ole Miss Rebel Power that we see at the football games. It is totally different from the spirit that these kids have with them saying, "We love Ole Miss and we want other people to know how much we love it so that they could feel comfortable here in spirit." And so what I think that it does for the University is give a student something good to hold on to that they can share with other black students across the State.²⁰

With the choir poised to represent the University far beyond the boundaries of Mississippi and the region, suddenly they come to represent, not only an amazing opportunity for the presentation of the school's official public image but also a liability.

¹⁹ Interview with Bonita Terry Malone 2/2/99

²⁰ Interview with Ethel Young Minor, 10/31/97

How will the administration determine that the messages sent by the choir will be consistent with their public relations policy? This is not to suggest that the choir would wish to bring the school into disrepute, but they may present images and words which jar with the current, sound bite laden, University campaign. With the involvement of Malaco in the promotion of the CD, the University will not be the only public relations department contacting the press. Even more significantly, once the choir, with the blessing of the administration, has signed the contract with Malaco it would be very difficult for the University to remove the name "University of Mississippi" from the product. Though the choir has always been representing the University and recruiting, only now is the University starting to wake up to its existence and feels a need to have some measure of control. As the choir receives increasing support from the University there will be teething problems as they cut their teeth as high profile ambassadors. Hopefully the choir will never be asked to present an image of "Ole Miss" that is felt to be inconstant with the experience of its members.

In April 1998, while Lloyd Holmes, LaRhonda Thompson, and I were delivering a progress report to Brian Reithal and Gloria Kellum, they expressed concerns over the proposed liner notes for the CD. The text, written by Ethel Young Minor, came from the program of the recorded concert.²¹ The proposed liner notes read:

We present to you a new generation of students who are the epitome of what The University of Mississippi represents as we enter the 21st century. These students do not whistle "Dixie" or wave the rebel flag. Instead, they sing praises to God from their hearts and wave the flag of peace to integrated audiences throughout the state of Mississippi and beyond.

At the meeting Gloria Kellum advised us not to use "lightening rod words," in this instance not only "Dixie" and "flag" but also "integrated." At the time Ethel Young Minor and I felt as though the choir was being censored.

²¹ Full text in the Appendix

I was surprised because I think I do a lot of things that are radical but I didn't consider that particular statement extremely radical. I thought it was a true statement that described the mentality of our students, so for somebody to take that and say that.

I guess I didn't consider it quite as radical as they did and was surprised that they would censor that, especially as I thought the singing was a lot more radical than the statement that I made. I thought if anything they would be censoring some of the statements made in the songs, the whole idea of being able to sing songs about liberation and freedom and "you just can't really define who I am, it is God who defines who I am, and I am here anyway." It is kind of like the spirit of the CD to me.²²

Ethel Young Minor is not alone in detecting the history of struggle on the campus in the songs she hears the choir sing. "Sparky" Reardon, the white associate dean of students, felt "that the spirit is so pure when the choir performs that it basically embodies a lot of the struggle, the spirit that so many students have experienced here over the last 35 years."²³

Gloria Kellum explained the line that she took over the liner notes, and in doing so gave an insight into the public relations policy of the University:

My point was this. We constantly point out what we don't do. So it constantly stays in the minds of people. If we say to people what we do do, then that sets the stage for what they will begin to expect us to do. So I try in all the communications that we do to reflect on the past, but you did this "a new generation of students." and then "sing praises to God." So what you are doing is talking about what we do do, not what we shouldn't do. Because the more you talk about what we shouldn't do, maybe what we were, or what was done by some people, the more you keep the issues of perceptions of the University, not race because it doesn't really deal with it, it deals with perceptions. So if we begin to talk about what we do expect people to do and what we do do, I think it will help other people join the reality of where we are.

Now my opinion about the University of Mississippi or any institution, and I could say the University of Massachusetts. Is that in society in general I certainly do not believe that our races are living with each other as well as we could. Do some of us? Yes, I think some of us do, in fact I think a lot of us do, but I do believe there are people who do not. And there are people who would like to reflect on a time when a lot of people didn't. But I guess it was best shown one day in an Alumni meeting. And I haven't said this to anybody. But an Alumni meeting in which someone was complaining that they wanted to wave the flag and the other alums just didn't want

²² Interview with Ethel Young Minor 2/11/99

²³ Interview with Sparky Reardon 2/11/99

to listen to him, purely just didn't want to listen to him. They said basically, "That's in the past, get over it." So I guess part of it is in order to move the people forward I think we as an institution need to present who we are now, not what we don't want to be or what we aren't, but what we want to be. And so I felt that [the liner notes] reflected to the negative behavior.²⁴

The second advisor, Lloyd Holmes, adopted a more conciliatory tone, and on his advice we rewrote the liner notes:

Personally I think that a good point was made by Dr. Kellum. I think the statement was good but truly when you look at the individuals who aren't familiar with this University, who may get this CD I think if they did indeed read that they may have said "They wave the Rebel Flag and whistle Dixie, gosh maybe I won't come."²⁵

Valerie Harmon, from her perspective as a former advisor to the choir, considers the quality of the advisors crucial in the future relationship between the University and the choir:

I think that the advisors set the tone for what the choir is going to do. I think as long as the choir has responsible advisors I don't think there will be a conflict, because I think that the University pretty much understands all the issues that occurred in the past and the recent present. I think that generally they work in a positive manner to resolve issues, or to facilitate positive progress. I really feel that way, I can't say that I have always felt that way, but I do feel that way now.

I think that we have good leaders now, as far as the University is concerned, who as long as the advisors in the choir are individuals who can keep their objectives aimed and very specific, I don't think they'll have conflict. Now if you get a bunch of loose advisors and just have a loose group, I think the University would have to take control, and then whose to say what might happen, and whose to say what kind of conflict might occur. I think as long as you have responsible people on both sides of the pendulum I think it will all balance out.²⁶

If any event symbolized the new standing of the choir with the University, and the complexities attendant to such a relationship, it was when UMGC sang for the Alumni Banquet at the Ramada Inn the night before the Homecoming game in September 1998. The event itself was for the top financial donors amongst the alumni. The audience was old, white, wealthy, and many were more than a little tipsy. The University's support had

²⁴ Interview with Gloria Kellum 2/9/99

²⁵ Interview with Lloyd Holmes 1/20/99

²⁶ Interview with Valerie Harmon 1/27/99

brought the choir before an audience which was incongruous in every way imaginable to the choir's experience. These, however, were the people who had vicariously supported the recording project through the Alumni Association and had given \$1600, so the choir felt no small obligation to sing. The dynamics of this arrangement left me uncomfortable. Reggie Turner had felt pride in his achievement of moving the white administration, including the Chancellor, to *come and hear* the choir. That night in the Ramada Inn the choir was definitely *going to sing* for the Alumni. The burden of race and history weighs heavily in Mississippi, and I found the resonances with slaves being invited up to the big house to play music to entertain the plantation owner and his guests disturbing. Gloria Kellum was concerned that I not allow issues of race to dominate my understanding of the evening:

[The] alumni affair [was] predominantly white, because the alumni who come to our meetings are typically in their fifties and sixties and so they are predominantly white.

I think it is significant in some ways because our alumni loved the group, they welcomed them with open arms. It wasn't about race, it was about being students, it was about making music that made people happy and those kinds of things. So on the one hand I think you could talk about it from that point of view. But on the other hand I think you ought to talk about it from the point of view that our alums absolutely loved it because it was wonderful music and it was something else that the University excelled in.

So I will have to say that I think their invitation probably came from their exposure, so the more people know about you the more you get invited. Plus I think there is a genuine effort by every part of the University to demonstrate every part of the University. I think that the alumni desperately try to represent the total University in all that they do. And so inviting the gospel choir was somewhat different than perhaps previously, but I think it is the collective thinking of a University who wants everybody to know that this is a place for everybody. And I just think when you hear that kind of music you celebrate, so we celebrate the dimensions of the University.²⁷

For Andy Beaird, a white Mississippian from Clinton, and choir member, the economic and racial dynamics of the evening were impossible to ignore:

The context was upper middle class white Mississippi. You know, bureaucrats, it was definitely the blue bloods of Mississippi. That is very familiar to me, just in

²⁷ Interview with Dr. Gloria Kellum 2/9/99

terms of where I have worked and grown up. My folks aren't really in that position, but I have just been around it all my life. It was very interesting to see an event which they are celebrating their university, to see an all black choir walking in in single file and come up to the front. I could look at the expressions on people's faces and know exactly what was going through their mind. Not everybody of course, but I remember seeing just a lot of very straight faces. I remember seeing a lot of people that wouldn't even look up front. I can recall looking at people who basically kept their head down the whole time.

I thought it was a very beautiful thing to see that things have progressed to the point where an all black choir would be asked to sing and be a part of the celebration of what has historically been a white, blue blood, university. The University is supposedly the heart of a state which is weighed down by a lot of racial baggage, and to see now there are efforts being made, [in]bringing in black culture into the University and making efforts to make that a viable part of campus life. We don't know whether that is done out of a genuine interest to see the black culture, or any other culture apart from white southern culture. You don't know if those efforts are being made out of a true longing to see all cultures being celebrated and brought together under the unity of the University, or whether this is something in the front end. Maybe they are being backed into a corner where if they don't do it then they may suffer consequences that they don't want to have to suffer.

But regardless I think, whether it is through genuine motivations to see unity, or whether it is from outside coercion, it is obvious in that concert there were people who maybe at first were a little questionable about whether this was proper, whether this was appropriate for such an occasion. You could look out and see some of the faces go from very oblivious, to interested, to amazed. Then they began clapping their hands and standing up and you saw big smiles on their faces and they were truly touched by the music, as I was the first time that I heard it. And I just thought that was a beautiful thing.²⁸

The relationship between the choir and the University administration is in its infancy. The University's desire to have a level of influence over a student organization to whom it is giving substantial financial support is understandable. However, the choir is accustomed to working unilaterally. For the past 24 years the administration has shown little interest in the activity of these students. The University has an unbelievable opportunity in the choir for both minority recruitment and positive national publicity. How the choir will respond to this new symbiotic relationship is yet to be decided. What is vital for the maintenance of the choir as black space at the University is that the choir

²⁸ Interview with Andrew Beaird. 2/2/99

does not lose its prophetic voice and presence as it becomes more closely connected with the institution.

Those with ears to hear at the Alumni Banquet could still hear the music of a changing world. As Israelite prophets stood in the courts of kings, so the choir sang to the Alumni:

There's someone else who is worse off than you,
Be Grateful.

There's someone else who would love to be in your shoes,
*Be Grateful.*²⁹

²⁹ Walter Hawkins, "Be Grateful", *Shawn Pace,- Just Because God Said It.* (Jackson: Savoy. 1998.)

CHAPTER IV

SOUNDS OF WHITENESS.

The influences of the white music program on, and white membership of, the Choir.

This chapter considers two ways that the context of an historically white University effects, and is effected by, the gospel choir: African American participation in the University's academic choral program and whites participation in the choir. Both of these threads are important aspects of the choir as a paradigm of integration because it is asking the question, how are the whites who make music at the University being influenced by, and how are they influencing, this African American cultural expression?

Bernice Johnson Reagan connects the start of the contemporary college choir movement with demands for a change in curriculum and policy of music departments away from an exclusive Eurocentricism:

The first college-based gospel choir was started at Howard University in 1965 by a group of brilliant musicians - Henry Davis, Wesley Boyd, and Richard Smallwood, all music majors who had been forbidden to play their music in the university's practice rooms. Changes came only after Black students insisted on a curriculum that acknowledged the presence and contribution of African Americans and a revision in treatment of African and African-based history and traditions, including gospel music.¹

The choral program at the University of Mississippi has a significant impact upon the gospel choir. Currently around a dozen members of the gospel choir are, or have been, in one of the music department's choirs, including Men's Glee, Women's Glee and, at the top, Concert Singers. Both the choir directors in the fall semester 1998 had been in

¹ Bernice Johnson Reagan, *We'll Understand it Better Bye and Bye: Pioneering African American Composers* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994.) p.17

the Concert Singers, and of the twelve, around half were on some type of music scholarship.

The head of the choral program is Jerry Jordan. He has worked since 1980 to build up and establish his program's reputation for excellence. As well as raising money to take the choirs on international tours to win various competitions, his office's efforts are bent on recruiting new voices. The length Jordan describes going to to secure a student is worthy of the football team's recruiters:

A great deal of our time is spent in recruiting. We have three faculty members involved in recruiting. There are a number of ways in which we do recruit. We are guest conductors for honor choirs, and all state choirs in the region. We meet students through that means. We travel to the best high school choral programs and visit their rehearsals. We cut CDs that we send to students who are prospective really fine recruits. We make a lot of telephone calls, we develop brochures that we mail to high school prospects. We solicit the names of these prospects from the directors. Send out posters. We invite various high school choirs to come to campus and spend an entire day with us, and we give the choir clinic, as well as having them observe our choral activities. Those are some of the things we do.²

In this effort to bring in the best voices for his choir, Jordan has been contributing to the gospel choir's pool of talented, classically trained singers, a number of whom have gone on to be musical directors. Dee Thomas, the current director, described how she was recruited:

I came and I visited. I talked to Dr. Jordan. Well first he had some representatives to recruit and the lady, Miss Shannon, she came to Jonesboro High School and she auditioned me. I sang a couple of scales and I did the spiritual "Swing Low." And so she called Dr. Jordan, told him "There's a person we want to come to Ole Miss." So I came and auditioned and he offered me a reasonably good amount of money and so that's why I am here.³

Not only is the choir influenced by the music department attracting these great voices, but the style of Jordan's choir direction also influences those who study under him, so that some of his technique is passed on to the gospel choir. On this point Jordan is convinced:

² Interview with Jerry Jordan, 1/29/99

³ Interview with Dee Thomas, 1/16/99

I have no doubt that [the musical directors] have picked up some of the things that they do from being in my choir, but I can't think of situations where they have asked my direct advice.⁴

Mineasa Turner, an assistant director of UMGC, considers her time in Concert Singers and the way it informs her handling of the choir:

I had a good time in Concert Singers. I enjoyed the music, I enjoyed the traveling, I wasn't a scholarship student so of course I was just in it for the joy of music and for some voice training, to be exposed to a different kind of music. I have always appreciated all different kinds of music and so that of course helped my appreciation for Classical music. It also helped me to hone my reading skills because we sang everything *a capella*. Basically if you didn't have a good ear you didn't need to be singing in concert singers. We had tests where you count off 1,2,3,4 and one person in each section get up and sing. If you don't have your part Dr. Jordan knew. Luckily I was never one of those people who had to be reprimanded for not knowing my music. But I had a good time in concert singers, it was a very interesting period in my life.

I feel that my experience with Concert Singers has honed my musical skills and my ear. I can hear a lot of things, I can teach and I can direct. I used to not direct, I just became a choir director 3 or 4 years ago, actually I tried directing the gospel choir once before and it didn't feel right, but now its just like speaking, like sleeping now! I can direct in my sleep. I feel that my musical ability in singing, being able to hear parts, being able to teach parts, being able to hear what's wrong, being able to show them what's right and convince them that I am right. [laughs] being able to know what to listen for.⁵

The way that this academic, Eurocentric training influences the actual music of the choir is considered in the next chapter.

As the gospel choir has risen in prominence at the University, the two choirs, Concert Singers and UMGC, have shared the same platform on two occasions. These were at the dedication of the Honors College and at the Sesquicentennial convocation, both during the fall semester, 1998. In my interviews people have drawn comparisons between the choirs without any prompting or questioning. It seems that Jordan has done such a good job in making the Concert Singers synonymous with quality choral music,

⁴ Interview with Jerry Jordan, 1/29/99

⁵ Interview with Mineasa Turner, 1/21/99

that when someone wishes to complement UMGC they mention the other choir. Here is one example from an interview with Gloria Kellum:

Would you expect a University to have world class choirs and performing groups? Maybe one, but here is this world class choir that gets all kinds of support etcetera, yet here is this group of students who for the love of music and other reasons produce a phenomenal, phenomenal sound and music and entertainment.⁶

Jordan refutes any suggestion that there is any sense of competition on his part. His unsolicited reference to the perceived rivalry between the choirs suggests he is well aware that comparisons are being drawn:

I am very pleased with the existence of the gospel choir. I guess some people had wondered if I think of [the gospel choir] in terms of competition and something of that nature. I think they are very complimentary to what we do here. We don't use the same vocal technique, and to some extent the gospel group is, through its sponsorship with the Black Student Union, they are more of a religious group in a way that other University choirs can not be.⁷

There has been no perception of competition on the part of the music department because, until recently, no overlap existed in audience, funding, or resources. The Sesquicentennial convocation saw a revealing incident. The gospel choir sang first, performing *We Have Come To Praise Him*, a contemporary gospel song from the recording project. In the audience were not only the Chancellor, faculty, and administration, but also alumni. When the Concert Singers took to the choir stands Jordan announced that they were going to change their selection from *America the Beautiful*. Rather than perform a piece from the Eurocentric classical cannon, his overwhelmingly white choir was to perform a spiritual. During the interview with Jordan he mentioned this episode, again unsolicited:

In the performance that we shared, after the great job that the gospel choir did, I felt pressured to do as well, and in fact I changed my selection from one that I suppose was more formally appropriate for the occasion, for one that was just more appealing musically on a general basis, *Joshua fit de battle of Jericho*.⁸

⁶ Interview with Gloria Kellum, 2/9/99

⁷ Interview with Jerry Jordan, 1/29/99

⁸ Interview with Jerry Jordan, 1/29/99

Though Jordan asserts that the two choirs are complimentary and not in competition it was easy for members of the gospel choir to construe his actions at the Convocation in just such terms.

The Concert Singers specialize in *a capella* renditions of choral works from the Western tradition, with a very demanding, precise and controlled presentation; while spirituals are performed, these are complex, contemporary, polished arrangements designed for the concert hall not the church service. In maintaining the high standard of this Eurocentric choral program, Jordan has no interest in recruiting raw, untrained talent; his choral scholars must arrive with the appropriate level of sight reading and vocal production. This is a selection technique which turns up more eligible white singers than African American. Jordan explains this discrepancy:

One unfortunate aspect of the preparatory programs that all students come here from is that many of them do not have music programs. This is especially the case in predominantly black schools. And so I think fewer blacks are trained for the kind of singing we are looking for among the members of our choirs than are whites or caucasians.

Despite the proportionately smaller pool of applicants, surprisingly Jordan reports that there is not a disproportionately low number of African Americans in the choral program:

I don't know that this years is typical. I know that two years ago, for instance, nine of the Concert Singers were black, and that runs considerably ahead of the percentage of that minority at the University.

Generally the Glee clubs will run a pretty fair number of blacks, especially the Women's Glee Club. And I think generally our numbers have mirrored the percentages of minorities in the University.⁹

There are now nearly fifty members of Concert Singers, four of whom are African American. Of those four, three are members of the gospel choir. When comparing the official photographs of the two choirs, both taken in front of the University's Lyceum, they are equally monochrome with isolated individuals of a different hue. If one looks at

⁹ Interview with Jerry Jordan, 1/29/99

the photograph of the gospel choir (Fig 4.1) and concludes that it is a "black choir," then it is only reasonable to conclude that Concert Singers (Fig 4.2) is a "white choir." This is the gospel choir's prevailing perception not only of the Concert Singers, but also the music department. Recurring themes in the conversation of singers who have been in Concert Singers and UMGC is that of discomfort, isolation and vulnerability. This is only to be expected when one is in such a small minority. Ethel Young Minor described the discomfort that can be the experience of a minority student:

When you walk across campus you stand out because you are only ten percent of the population. When you sit in a classroom usually you are one to two percent of who makes up that classroom. So you're always marked, you're always targeted in a way that is very uncomfortable.¹⁰

This sense of being targetted is compounded for choir members by reports that Jordan advises his choir members against singing gospel music and even tries to prevent those holding choral scholarships from doing so. Reggie Turner, whose student memory stretches back to 1987, had no such experience while in Concert Singers, but he recalls people who had:

I sang in concert singers for two or three years. I was in three different choirs for the University, I did get a scholarship, but it wasn't a full scholarship. It took up a lot of my time, and also I was doing the gospel choir and all of the other stuff, it was kind of wearing me out. So after I really was serious about dedicating my time to the gospel choir, I left Concert Singers.

I didn't meet much resistance [to leaving]. I have heard some people say that he told them if they joined the gospel choir that they couldn't sing in Concert Singers. I didn't witness it, but I have heard several people say it, and a lot of them were not in the same class. Meaning that I heard people before me say that, and people during my time say that, and people after my time say it. All of which never even really knew each other.¹¹

¹⁰ Interview with Ethel Young Minor, 10/31/97

¹¹ Interview with Reggie Turner, 1/29/99

Fig. 4.1 University of Mississippi Gospel Choir, 1998.



Fig 4.2 University of Mississippi Concert Singers, 1998.



Mineasa Turner was in the Concert Singers in the early 90's, and unlike Reggie Turner, she was advised against joining the gospel choir:

When I was in concert singers, I was also singing in gospel choir, singing in both. I was advised not to be in the gospel choir. The reason I was not told what to, or [what] not to do, was because I was not a scholarship student. But I was advised not to.

Actually being in the Gospel Choir, I do not feel it ruins your voice. I do feel that sometimes if I am overworked I get horse, but that is with any kind of singing. As far as the Concert Singers are concerned I only used about a third of my voice. I used a different kind of voice singing in the concert singers than I do singing in the gospel choir. And during that time I lost a lot of the range that I normally use singing gospel music.¹²

It is not only African Americans who have heard teachers in the music department disparage the gospel choir. Chalis Pomeroy, a white voice major and former member of Concert Singers, joined the gospel choir partly to find out if what she was hearing was true:

I had heard through various professors and other students in the music department that some of the singing that the gospel choir does is detrimental to good vocal health, but I haven't found any of the singing that I have done in the gospel choir to be damaging. On the contrary, I think it has built my range of abilities. It is a different style of singing and the approach may be not as classical, the attacks on different words may be harder, may have a more popular sound. It is not the classical voice training ideal approach to singing, but it works.¹³

Jordan explained his dislike of the vocal technique he associates with gospel music:

Unfortunately with a lot of gospel choirs I feel that the main tonal difference is one of lack of good vocal production, and more vocal production along the lines of the shout.

Of course we work for what we call diamonds and velvet in the Concert Singers, which is resonance by focusing the sound through the mask, but also opening up the mouth and getting a lot of warmth in the tone. With most gospel choirs its pretty much a larynx high shouted sound. In some cases damaging because students will miss use it and much of the time they sing about as loud as they can get. I haven't felt that way about the gospel choir here so much, and I know Dee is encouraging good vocal technique.

¹² Interview with Mineasa Turner, 1/21/99

¹³ Interview with Chalis Pomeroy, 1/27/99

At the same time the sound that the gospel choir gets, the good ones, is so spontaneous and so pretty, and exuberant, and I like all of those qualities.¹⁴

It would seem that Jordan feels he has his students vocal health at heart when he makes such observations. I then asked him, "In your experience have you had students who have hurt their voices by being involved in gospel singing?" Jordan answered that he had not, but qualified his answer by concluding that was because he had taught them the correct way to sing:

No, not necessarily, at least I can't think of them. And we've had not only a number of student directors of the choir, but a number of students who've also participated in the choir. But those who participate in the choir know how to use their voices and make a point not to misuse them.¹⁵

Whether or not Jordan is correct regarding the damaging effects of gospel singing on the voice, the effect this attitude has upon his students can be very troubling. For the impressionable freshman who has grown up with the music of the church, who considers this style of singing a profound and powerful expression of faith and heritage, who has been highly valued in their church community for their vocal talent, who has been prayed for by their church as they go college to develop their God given talent; for such a student to hear all of this devalued and be told that she should not sing that music anymore is disturbing, disorienting and upsetting. For singers to turn their back on the music of the church is to deny their cultural and spiritual identity. Dee Thomas explained why, contrary to advice, she joined the gospel choir:

I joined the gospel choir because I wanted to go back to my roots. In Concert Singers we basically stick to spiritual and classical pieces and we do French, Latin all that type of music, but I wanted to stick with the music that I knew best.

I heard a lot about the gospel choir, but, the first year I got here I was unable to participate in the gospel choir because I was told that it would strain my voice. I was a music major at the time and they felt as if it was not a good decision for me to be in the gospel choir at that time. But as I continued I had to start thinking on my own and I'd been doing it for so many years I can switch. I can do gospel music and I can do the other type of music and I can switch my voice like that. But they couldn't

¹⁴ Interview with Jerry Jordan, 1/29/99

¹⁵ Interview with Jerry Jordan, 1/29/99

understand, so I just went ahead for the year, and went along with it. After that I made my own decision, I felt like that was something that I wanted to do, and right now there is no problem, no problem at all.¹⁶

If one is on a choral scholarship, the decision to sing in the gospel choir is not easy. Consider the traditional dynamics of power that mitigate against such a decision; of teacher and student, old and young, white and black, and finally the risk that one will lose the scholarship that makes it possible to be at the University at all. Dee Thomas was concerned about revealing she was the musical director of the choir, but Jordan's response has become her testimony:

They were shocked, they were very shocked. But I was really happy that they accepted it. He accepted it, and he congratulated me, and he even opened the door so if I had any questions or if I needed some help, that he would be glad to help. I prayed about the situation that the Lord would touch his heart, so he wouldn't think I was trying to override him, or something. But everything worked out for the best and he's now happy with it.¹⁷

The gospel choir as a whole is very aware of their fellow member's experiences as part of the music department. Testimonies such as Thomas's are shared with the whole choir. The success of the choir is often presented in terms of personal triumph over the choral program, and no matter how hard the faculty advisors work to disarm this stance, the rhetoric persists. This perception of the choral program's attitude towards the gospel choir colors the choir's perception of the whole University; it fuels the choir's suspicion of assistance from the administration. Lloyd Holmes, the assistant dean of students and advisor to the choir, considers the relationship between the choir and the music department to be unfortunate:

I think the relationship [between the choir and the music department] is strained. I think on the gospel choir's part there's very little trust there and that's probably because of maybe incidents from the past. I have been told that some of those people who are on scholarships have been told that they don't need to participate in the gospel choir because it is going to ruin their voices. I think that seems to be the impression of some in the music department. I think merely because we do exist the

¹⁶ Interview with Dee Thomas, 1/16/99

¹⁷ Interview with Dee Thomas, 1/16/99

department has to acknowledge that the gospel choir exists. But it has been made perfectly clear that the choir is not a part of the department. If the choir were a part of that department, a lot of that tradition of gospel music would end up lost, especially with the music department that exists today.

It compounds the individuals thinking that the University does not want African American's here. They may not think that the University as a whole does not want African Americans on campus, but they may think that the university doesn't want African Americans in the music department. Because the music department is a part of the university. A lot of individuals may feel that if one part doesn't want us here, the rest don't.

I think that if individuals feel that a department on campus does not want them there then, no matter what another part of the University does, they still have that perception there. They're not wanted. What you perceive to be real, is real for you.¹⁸

The most dramatic manifestation of this antipathy towards the music department I witnessed was during a rehearsal for the fall concert in 1998. Mineasa Turner was directing the choir in an eight-part spiritual, *While The Bloods Still Running Warm In Your Veins*. Mineasa was unhappy with the choir's efforts and reminded us with a considerable degree of passion that *we* were the people with the blood in *our* veins, and what were we thinking to allow Concert Singers to sing *our* music better than us. She wanted the choir to show Dr. Jordan how this music should be sung. This outburst was an attack on Turner's perception of Jordan's attitudes, that African Americans were less capable of performing their own music than his white choir. Also present was a disparaging of the Concert Singers use of this music as entertainment, because performed in its correct context this music is testimony. Several months later when I asked Turner to explain what she meant, her tone was considerably calmer and she unsuccessfully attempted to remove the racial dynamic from her comments:

The gist of what I was saying is that Concert Singers sing spirituals, and they sing them well. I think if you have been to school and have studied in music and music theory then you basically know the background of where spirituals come from and why they were written, or what the meaning behind certain spirituals are. But it takes a testimony of knowing what "while the bloods running warm in our veins" means.

It is nice to sing, and it is nice to put all the musical skill, you know, all the nice additives into it to make it a nice sounding song, but as far as Concert Singers is

¹⁸ Interview with Lloyd Holmes, 1/20/99

concerned I feel they don't have the voice ability to sing the song with the warmth that it is supposed to be sung with. I don't feel like they have the testimony to sing *While the bloods still running warm in your veins*. I also feel that that is our stuff. Not to make it a white/black thing. I have heard many singers, many classical singers sing spirituals and move me. OK so I am not making it a white/black thing. *But* I think that is our stuff, that is our music. We shouldn't allow Concert Singers to out sing us in our own spirituals. That is our stuff. Let them sing it, I don't care if they sing it but that is our music and we should be the masters of singing spirituals.¹⁹

The gospel choir is a place where African Americans can feel comfortable expressing views such as these. It is a place where members can feel they do not have to conform to a set of white, academic expectations in the music they make. It is a black space. Reggie Turner reflected on these issues when he considered what he brought to the choir as a director:

Musically I know that a lot of people, well vocally a lot of people did not want to sing with white people *per se*. A lot of them could not read music, and a lot of them still had talent and abilities that were not being utilized. And it was an awesome thing for me to do, I felt, because I had spent so many years in a choir, I could read music, I could play and teach. And I understood, I had taken voice lessons, and so I understood what it took to produce those kinds of tones and sounds, and I wanted to make it work with them. With something that they were used to, in terms of gospel music, as opposed to being of the extreme elite group of Concert Singers for example, a lot of them would have been very intimidated by that, here again from the aspect of having to read music extensively, being of a certain vocal ability, and also being able to harmonize with people who were not necessarily like you.²⁰

From its first meeting in 1974, the choir has been a place of psychological security for the members. Ethel Young Minor elaborated on this theme:

I think it is important because it is a safe place. It is just a safe place where people can come and feel like they are whole. It is where you don't feel invisible anymore. And it feels like it is OK to be whoever I am. It is OK to be who I am spiritually, racially, culturally, all of that is affirmed in that room. I think what is more important than what the choir does for other people in performance, it is what happens in just the practice room, that community that is built among black students. So that if they never went out and performed for anybody, I think that's important.²¹

¹⁹ Interview with Mineasa Turner, 1/21/99

²⁰ Interview with Reggie Turner, 1/29/99

²¹ Interview with Ethel Young Minor 2/11/99

Into this black space a few white people venture to sing with the gospel choir. One of the first white members of the choir was Jean Larroux who joined in 1991. When I joined the choir in 1997 I was the only white, however over the succeeding semesters the number has grown, to the current total of five. Being a religious organization the official policy is that all are welcome to sing, and whites are greeted with warmth. Behind this welcome lies a question informed by a deep distrust of white motivation -- "Why are they here?"

In considering the choir as a force for integration, ambassadors for a culture that has been undervalued at Ole Miss by many, including the music department, the fact that members of that dominant culture choose to join and identify with a culture is of significance. Brian Ward, in his book *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations*, observes that whites who show an interest in African American music, even to the point of performing it, are able to do so and not have their basic stereotypes and world view challenged. By interpreting their experience of the music in the context of their white worldview, these misperceptions are reinforced, not broken down.²² Therefore key questions regarding whites involvement in the choir, and how it pertains to a process of integration, include: are these whites joining the choir out of a respect for the gospel music culture and are they allowing this experience to change them? These questions are encompassed in the one being asked by the choir, "Why are they here?"

The four white choir members I interviewed were Andy Beaird, J.P. Caldwell, Michale Melton, and Chalis Pomeroy. All four are strong individual personalities and have their own specific reasons for joining. Andy Beaird, a graduate of Mississippi State and an intern with a Presbyterian campus ministry, Reformed University Fellowship (RUF), was influenced to join after hearing the choir sing:

²² Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (Berkeley: University of California Press. 1998), p. 242.

Well, a lot of it had to do with the first time I actually saw the gospel choir. I just remember being so impacted by the performance. I had never really been to a gospel choir performance so I was very moved by it. I had come to know some of the gospel choir members I think it was Morales [Mobley] who I first began talking with. I met him in the Johnson Commons, and I ate lunch with him one time and he invited me to come and just sit in. I was to visit, and sing if I wanted to.

I think two weeks later I came and sang a little bit. I just felt very drawn to the music and wanted to learn more about the music. So that is probably what initially drew me to the choir and probably after that I began to see just the opportunity it was to develop relationships amongst the black students. Because, just after having been at the campus for a year, it is so obvious that there were two worlds co-existing on campus, but very little interaction between the two. And it seemed as if this was a great way for me to enter into their world, and to learn from them, and in the midst , developing relationships that maybe could begin to break down the barriers that are so obvious on campus.²³

J.P. Caldwell offers the simple answer, "To praise God." This of course is the "right" answer as far as the gospel choir is concerned, the least threatening and also the least revealing. In 1991 the *Oxford Eagle* carried Larroux's bland answer to the same question: "I joined this choir to praise the Lord, not to make some kind of point... Like everyone else in the BSU choir, I'm here to sing."²⁴ Note the similarities between this and Caldwell's answer :

I sort of looked through the "M" Book, looked at all the different clubs and opportunities on campus and picked some out that I thought I would enjoy participating in and saw the gospel choir as one of them and called the director Lloyd Holmes, or one of the directors, asked him was it open to anybody, and what type of choir it was, what type of music they sing and he told me about what it was and he told me I was welcome to come out and listen to them and so I did, and began singing with them the same time.

I enjoy singing, I enjoy praising God, and I thought the gospel choir was the only choir on campus that was solely devoted to praising God.

I felt that the songs that they sing were really sincere and I felt like the people at the time, I felt like they were really interested in giving praise to Jesus Christ and thought I wanted to be a part of that.²⁵

²³ Interview with Andy Beaird 2/2/99

²⁴ Jesse Holland, "Desire to sing prompts white to join black choir", *Oxford Eagle*, 10/1/91. p.1.

²⁵ Interview with J.P. Caldwell, 2/9/99

The two women, Melton and Pomeroy, joined because of their respective experiences of the music department. Pomeroy (as already described) joined out of a curiosity to experience a different vocal technique and:

Because I had been invited by several of my friends that are in the gospel choir. Morales [Mobley] was the main one that really pushed me to come to a rehearsal to see what it was about.²⁶

Melton, who wished to sing in the choir, had found no place in the official choral program:

Well at first I joined the University choir, which is like sopranos and the high singing and all. And I wasn't fitting in there. They were so structured and you had to do scales and it was reading music, and I am more of a just let it go kind of person; I love to sing. And then when my friends, Morales Mobley, and Melinda Smith, invited me to listen to the gospel choir, and it was kinda more what I was used to from singing at home. I knew Morales because he was in my orientation group, and Melinda and me grew up together, we went to High School together.²⁷

Three of the four mention that they were personally invited to join, citing the name of Morales Mobley. Mobley, from Pascagoula, Mississippi, grew up attending a multi-racial Pentecostal church:

The kind of church I go to, I go to United Pentecostal, and we are diverse anyway. And I can not really see one color in the choir because I am so used to my home church being mixed with Oriental, Indian, Black, White, Italian, whatever, it doesn't matter. So that is why with the gospel choir I could not see just having a black choir because it is *gospel*, and the gospel is for every one. If they can get with it then they can come.²⁸

This multiracial church experience sets Mobley apart from the majority of the choir, and explains why he is active in recruiting white members, while his peers are not. For Beaird, Caldwell, and Pomeroy the choir was their first experience of gospel music. Caldwell admits to having had next to no exposure to this style of music at all:

²⁶ Interview with Chalis Pomeroy, 1/27/99

²⁷ Interview with Michale Melton, 2/9/99

²⁸ Interview with Morales Mobley, 2/23/99

I heard gospel music maybe during TV. commercials. That's about it! Advertised on TV, but I have never bought [a record], never listened to it on the radio.²⁹

Andy Beaird was able to see the influence that gospel music had had on the music of his church tradition, but the segregated nature of his upbringing in Jackson, Mississippi, prevented him from experiencing more:

Gospel music had its influences on the music that I grew up singing at church. We'd sing gospel hymns for instance, but they definitely weren't sung right. For instance the music I heard at the concert. So the style and the presentation of the music was very different. So I guess I'd been effected by gospel music, but had never really been in a context where I was able to hear gospel music sung like it was meant to be sung.

And also I didn't go to church with a significant amount of African Americans in my church. I went to an integrated high school, but there was no gospel choir at our high school. I guess I didn't grow up in an environment where I would ever hear it and I didn't.... I was never intentional about going to listen to it.³⁰

Michale Melton is the exception; she has a background in gospel music. Just like Beaird she also found her experience of worship limited by the segregation in her church; so she moved.

I went to a First Baptist church but kind of drifted away from there and started going to a church called Bethlehem, they're a really black church. And I would go in and sometimes I would go in and sometimes just sit and listen to them, like during their choir practices and all. And it kind of touched me more than anything else.

I kinda never fit in with the white people. [laughs] My grandmother always said that somewhere down the line I must have black in me. Cos I always ran with my black friends, and I joined the clubs with my black friends, and I always considered myself a little black. It was always a friendship thing I suppose.³¹

For the white choir members, significant influences on their attitudes are their experiences of high school. All of the whites went to state-funded high schools rather than to private schools, many of which are the legacy of the White Citizens Council's organized white flight from the high schools to thwart efforts to de-segregate the schools.

²⁹ Interview with J.P. Caldwell, 2/9/99

³⁰ Interview with Andy Beaird 2/2/99

³¹ Interview with Michale Melton, 2/9/99

Both Caldwell and Melton recount their experiences of being racial minorities. In

Caldwell's case it was because of his involvement in sports:

I have never joined any other groups that were African American, but all my life I have played sports, played basketball, I'm originally from the Mississippi Delta so that should tell you how most of the time you're the only white person, always the only white person on the team, many times the only white person in the gym. So of course I grew up around African Americans in Mississippi a lot more than a lot of my other class mates because I was on the basketball team all the time and I developed close relationships with them.

And through that I think I've gained a better appreciation for the culture that they bring to America, to Mississippi and the South. So even though I've never been part of a formal organization, I have been around black people all my life, a lot of my best friends and former room mates and class mates are African American.³²

Melton's experience was a little more pronounced than being a minority in the gym:

From where I'm from [Coffeeville, MS] we were just a big old small town, and other than my family members we were the only white people in the school so we had to mingle with them or you'd be by yourself. A lot of the white people went to Kirg Academy in Grenada, and my grandmother said she would never separate us from the blacks because we'd have to grow up with them anyway, that once we'd graduated from the academy we'd have to live with them, so why not just go ahead and live with them as kids. I grew up with it so I am used to hanging with black people and the white ones just don't understand that.

Up here at college it is a lot different because you're not expected to hang out with black people. It is a big separation on Ole Miss campus between the blacks and the whites. And when someone tries to breach that separation you kind of get turned on by the other people. A lot of the white people on this campus tend to look at me strange because I spend a lot of my time with my black friends and hanging out with them and singing in the choir, and they give me looks that aren't very nice.³³

In the socially segregated world of "Ole Miss" one would expect whites who join the gospel choir to have a certain amount of empathy with those students who find themselves in a minority. To leave one's comfort zone is an unusual experience for a white person at Ole Miss. Pomeroy was taken aback to hear African Americans talking frankly about whites in her presence:

³² Interview with J.P. Caldwell, 2/9/99

³³ Interview with Michale Melton, 2/9/99

I think that there are times that there are some things that are said, that are not necessarily directed at me, Chalis Pomeroy, but some things that are said about the music department, or things that are said about white music, that kind of surprise me a little bit. It shouldn't have surprised me but there are times that you wouldn't expect someone to say that while you are there, [I wouldn't] expect someone to say something about white people while I am sitting there.³⁴

For Beaird it was a valued learning experience to be in this black space, outside both his comfort zone and his "competence" zone:

I think that it is very critical as well, and beneficial for students to directly learn from their fellow black students, and to be in a position where they are stripped of anything that they could offer in terms of that particular experience, and that particular event, because that is definitely the way I felt when I went. There wasn't anything that I could do, and there wasn't anything that I could say to contribute in a positive way is the way I felt. And that is pretty much true for my experience there for a while, and if anything what you did have to contribute took away from maybe the quality of the singing and dancing. [laughs]

I think it is good for us as the white race to be in a position where we are solely dependent on the other culture and race to teach us. And I think that being in the choir as a white male and being stripped of anything that I could offer to the event or experience is indicative, or representative of maybe the way a lot of black students historically have felt coming to a white campus, into a white university. I am not saying that in actuality they don't have anything to offer, or don't have anything to contribute, but maybe in the way they have been perceived, the way they have felt.³⁵

Brian Ward states in his book that "whites rarely consider the huge price blacks paid for that formidable music. Whites seldom appreciated that black music... [was] part of a culture of survival and self affirmation."³⁶ It would seem from my interviews that it is possible for a white to join the choir, and even after a period of a semester and a half still to have little appreciation or empathy with the spirit of the choir, or its members. J.P. Caldwell finds some of the emphasis of the choir unhelpful to his way of thinking, thus confirming Ward's assertion:

I have noticed a lot of racial overtones since I have been in the choir. I think when I came the only thing that I was interested in doing is praising God, and that is still why I am there. And I have noticed a lot of, probably what you'd just call, racial or

³⁴ Interview with Chalis Pomeroy, 1/27/99

³⁵ Interview with Andy Beaird 2/2/99

³⁶ Ward, p. 242.

political agendas that the members of the choir I think are attempting to achieve. I don't really care for them particularly. I just think that personally a lot of them are not there just solely to praise God and they are there more because it is a black organization and it is a fairly successful black organization. More or less illustrates some of the strides that black people have made in civil rights and stuff, and I think they concentrate on that a little bit more than praising God sometimes, and I don't particularly care for that.

I have had several discussions with Lloyd Holmes, one of the [advisors] and we just have very different opinions of several things, and I think Dr. Young Minor has expressed her views on them also and she also disagrees with me. But that's just personal opinions and I try to keep an eye on the fact that I am there to praise God and peoples racial and political views really are irrelevant.

I really don't think it is really important the racial make up of the choir. I think some of the members actually think it is important for it to be a mostly black choir and I think that more or less prolongs the racial problems we have in the South. Just like at one time white people wouldn't let black people be members of the particular clubs they were in and segregated them. That caused problems back then. I think if they were just open minded and really don't care, or are accepting of any person who comes into their choir regardless of race, I think they would be better off.³⁷

By denying any racial significance to choir membership in stressing the Christian content, Caldwell is able to avoid having to address issues of cultural difference. This lack of appreciation that the music is part of a culture of "survival and self affirmation" is in stark contrast to Beaird's critical reflection on both his own culture and that of the choir:

In a sense I am a part of their history, but not a favorable one. My roots, and my history, and my family, were a part of their history that caused an environment to where I can't understand, I will never be able to really understand and be a part of the history of their music.

Their music was started by their grandfather's grandfather and was passed down, and my family chose not to be a part of that. More than that, my roots didn't think that was a legitimate kind of worship. So not only is the music foreign to me in the sense that I have never heard it much, and have never been exposed to it much, but it goes deeper than that. It is a result of my history. It was very intentional that long ago white people weren't taking part in the music, and it was for very racially driven reasons.

And I will say this for instance; I remember when we first started preparing for our CD and our Spring performance, and we started singing that spiritual *While the Bloods Still Running in Your Veins*, that was one point when I definitely felt like, "It is amazing that they would even let me sit here and sing this with them." I mean it

³⁷ Interview with J.P. Caldwell, 2/9/99

really is, it is amazing. And I almost felt like I had no right to sing it just because that spiritual is so reflective of a day and age when the African Americans were being oppressed and were subjected to slavery. For me that was such ... it brought about a lot of shameful emotions, even though that wasn't something at that point in time.... I mean I don't feel like I want to take responsibility for slavery, but I do feel as though I am responsible for healing the wounds that it caused. And I think that is part of our responsibilities as a white race.

Anyway, I do remember singing that song, but you know what, I ended up singing that song with a lot of emotion, and I remember that it was in singing that song and being compelled by that music to understand its meaning, but from a very different perspective. So it turned out that because of my background, even though it was different, that I could understand the meaning and be moved by the lyrics, probably as much anybody in the room, but for very different reasons. If that makes sense?³⁸

The choir as a black space, a place where African Americans feel themselves to be out from under the pressure of the monolithically white culture of Ole Miss, is clearly under threat with every new white person who joins the choir. If those whites who join have an empathy for the culture of "self affirmation and survival" and the spirituality which is the context of the music they are wishing to sing, then maybe that threat is lessened. Currently to be a white member of UMGC one has to leave one's white comfort zone and become a guest in someone else's culture. If the number of white members increases, then the challenge to their white perceptions of culture and race will decrease. There is little reason to believe that numbers will not increase as, with the help of the administration, the gospel choir is perceived as "diverse" and psychological barriers to joining are lowered.

There are already indications that, even with only five whites, the choir is less challenging to whites who join. In my interviews with whites I asked the question, "What difference does your color make to your being in the choir." I felt this question would reveal a great deal about the extent to which whites had been made to consider race by the choir experience. The answer that Chalis Pomeroy gave was brief and focused on the group's acceptance of her:

³⁸ Interview with Andy Beaird 2/2/99

It doesn't really make a big difference to me, although the music is new to me and that whole background is not mine. When I first started coming to rehearsals I was a bit concerned that I stuck out.³⁹

After the interview she apologized for not saying more, and explained that I had given her no forewarning and so she had not thought much about the matters my questions raised. Pomeroy had been in the choir for a full semester when I interviewed her. A month later she wished to be interviewed again. This was after the choir had sung at a Pentecostal church in New Albany, Mississippi. During the service Morales Mobley, the friend who had invited her to join the choir, and who sat next to her, started behaving in a way she had never seen before. In the cold light of analysis she observed that, " He wasn't behaving under the constraints of white culture." In fact he was "getting his shout on," dancing , eyes closed, sweating, and in danger of crashing into the astonished Pomeroy. Until this point Pomeroy's interest had been an academic curiosity in a style of choral music and performance with which she was unfamiliar. Now, as she tried to avoid being flattened by the ecstatic Mobley, she started to realize she was in a completely different culture:

That was my first experience in a Pentecostal church. It is so far outside the realm of what is comfortable for me. Until you have an experience of being one of maybe three white people in a black church, you really don't get a full understanding of what it means...

It is a valuable learning experience, you really don't experience someone's culture until you experience someone's food, religion, and music.⁴⁰

What is significant is that Pomeroy's understanding of culture was not challenged in this way before. She had, after all, been in the choir for a semester, attended rehearsals twice a week, and performed in the fall concert in Fulton Chapel. The charismatic phenomena she experienced in New Albany (which are considered further in the next chapter) were not a part of the rehearsals at that time; though when I joined the choir, and for a semester was the only white person present, these Pentecostal manifestations of the

³⁹ Interview with Chalis Pomeroy, 1/27/99

⁴⁰ Interview with Chalis Pomeroy, 2/28/99

Spirit's presence were regular occurrences. Their decline is due to a number of factors. The choir's leadership is no longer dominated by Pentecostals, and during the CD project time did not allow the rehearsal to become extended times of praise. Another factor may be that as the space has become less exclusively African American so the style of spirituality has been tempered to accommodate the white members.

Just as the process of true integration is advanced by white members of the choir learning to first recognize and then appreciate a culture other than their own, it is also threatened if the choir chooses to dilute some of its cultural markers (i.e. shouting) to accommodate these new members. In doing this, the choir lessen the chance that the white members will be challenged to change their world view.

The few whites in the choir are not the only ones who enter into the black space of the choir and learn to appreciate the experience. An indicator of the value that the white campus culture has started to recognize in the gospel choir is the increase in white student attendance at the choir's concerts on campus. I have watched the demographic shift in the audiences. In the fall concert in 1997, out of the 400 people in the education auditorium, maybe a dozen were white. At the concert in Fulton Chapel a year later, with ticket sales of 700, approximately 300 were white. A great deal of this change was the result of increased publicity on campus generated by the CD recording and the Sesquicentennial involvement, but the biggest single factor was probably Beaird's involvement with the Reformed University Fellowship. Chris Ware, a choir member, sees the involvement of RUF as changing the audience:

When Andy got in the choir he did a lot of publicity for the choir, he was telling everybody how great the choir was, how he enjoyed being in it, when we were performing. The organization he is in, RUF, we got invited to sing at one of there functions, and at a second they were associated with which gave us a lot of publicity. The people in the audience stated perceiving us as not just a black choir but as another University Christian organization, just like RUF or the Baptist Student Union.

[At our fall 1998 concert the audience] was predominantly black, we had a few specks through our regular non black supporters, but it wasn't as diverse as our

spring recording concert. Our Spring concert was packed, we had people standing outside, blacks, whites, Hispanics.⁴¹

Beaird watched the response of the white students to the gospel choir, seeing it as a way he could contribute to breaking down some of the cultural and racial barriers that exist on the campus:

We just asked the choir to come sing at RUF. That was all it took. The majority of RUF are middle, upper middle class white southerners, evangelical Christians with a small percentage of international students and African Americans. Actually we had at one point 3 African Americans [out of] about 200.

The initial response was overwhelming. That response wasn't evoked until they were able to hear and experience the ministry of the gospel choir. Basically it took, sadly enough, the choir coming to RUF, which is very indicative of white man's approach to reconciliation [which] is to wait.

There was a standing ovation when the choir came and sang and I had students come up to me and ask me more about the choir. That they had never heard of the choir for instance, which is very indicative of the two worlds coexisting on campus not really knowing much about the other. And really it is the white world on this campus that really doesn't know much about the black culture at the University of Ole Miss. But being in the choir it is very obvious, and it is only logical, that the African American culture on campus knows everything about our culture. That is very obvious.

I think that was very telling of the ignorance that is involve, people in RUF who are so involved on campus, and all the different organizations, the Fraternities and Sororities and student government, and all of those kind of things, they had no idea that there was even a gospel choir, that there was a ministry of music on campus. A lot of the response was almost kind of a surprise like, "I can't believe we didn't know about this."

"Do they sing a lot?"

"Where do they sing?"

I remember a few students reacting in such a manner. And so from there it was very easy once we had other performances to get RUF students excited about going to those performances. I remember another response to the choir coming and singing and in their experience, whether it was at RUF or at another concert, they realized that students in the choir were in their class, in their different classes or maybe even in some different organizations that they were in. There again it was a kind of an element of surprise, "there's so-and-so they are in my art class." And so it evoked RUF students to go and say, "Hey, I am in your English 101 class." You could see relationships began to evolve just out of their experience of having seen them in a context where they were on the receiving end of the choir.⁴²

⁴¹ Interview with Chris Ware, 5/11/98

⁴² Interview with Andy Beaird 2/2/99

Even though Beaird bemoans the fact that the choir had to initiate the contact, significant numbers of RUF chose to support the choir by attending the choir's concerts. An interesting element to Beaird's story is that of recognition. The white students *recognized* members of the choir, *recognized* them as being incredibly talented and versed in a culture that they had little or no idea of. There is almost a sense that these white students are really seeing their black peers for the first time. "Sparky" Reardon noticed the same response in a different set of white students:

This year I took my freshman seminar class to the concert and it was all white, and it was amazing to see their reaction to it. They had never seen anything like that before. I remember in particular some of the young women sitting in close proximity to me, and one young man, identifying members of the choir as people that they knew from the residence hall and the class and amazed at their talent. The guy next to me said, "That is my lab partner and she never says anything."⁴³

The social segregation that the majority of white students have been raised in renders members of different cultures almost invisible. It is easy to dismiss or downplay whites attendance at the gospel choir's concerts because white people have always flirted with black music and African Americans have always been acceptable to whites as entertainers. However to do this would be to miss the choir's potential to open the eyes of its audience. That the medium is music means that some of those in the audience will have almost unwittingly entered into the black space of a gospel concert. But to dismiss the choir's influence for integration in this way is not to appreciate that the power dynamic has changed since the days of minstrelsy. The white students are having their eyes opened by their *peers*, who they primarily recognise as their classmates, not objects of entertainment.

The University's music department is perceived as unaccepting of anything other than white western traditions of choral music, but this has not prevented the gospel choir being appreciated and valued by the University. More and more white students will be

⁴³ Interview with Sparky Reardon 2/11/99

able to voluntarily *experience* gospel music, and not just hear it on TV advertising. In this tale of success lies a note of caution. For the choir to contribute an uniquely African American culture at the University of Mississippi they must be careful to maintain the cultural markers that denote the choir and its concerts as black space. To yield to the temptation to accommodate the white sensibilities of choir members or congregations would be to diminish the power of the choir's prophetic, incarnational presence at the University.

CHAPTER V

SOUNDS OF BLACKNESS

The musical traditions of the Gospel Choir

Music is central to consideration of the Gospel Choir at the University of Mississippi. It is the music itself, and its presentation, that for the last twenty-five years has drawn audiences and demanded recognition at the University. It is the music, a distinctive African American art form, which is incongruous and prophetic in the context of an historically white institution. This chapter considers the church and musical backgrounds of the choir members, the way this influences the sound of the choir, and the background and agendas of the musical directors. It will address also how the recording project may have changed the choir.

While the choir provides an emotional home for many of its members it would be a mistake to think that the music is simply a comforting musical extension of the home churches. Although all of the choir members have experience of church music prior to joining the choir, the nature of this experience varies and depends on a number of factors: the denomination of the home church, the size of church, the likelihood of direct involvement in performing, and the choir member's perception of her own abilities. If one comes from a congregation of twenty-five people one may well have the best voice in the church, have sung solos regularly, and be confident. In a church of 900 this is less likely to be the case. For Mineasa Turner, an assistant director of the choir from spring 1998, joining the choir was a departure from her church experience.

I came to the gospel choir in my freshman year. It was one of my first exposures to gospel music because my church at home, we sing some gospel music, old James Cleveland songs and old Shirley Ceaser, nothing like the contemporary stuff we sing

now. I got some exposure being a part of the National Baptist Congress for Christian education, and I would do that in the Summer time. They would have a youth choir every summer, and so I was exposed during that, but that was it. I was somewhat afraid coming to the gospel choir because I figured, "Gosh, everybody already knows how to sing this kind of music. All I've sung is hymns and spirituals and stuff like that"¹

Brenda Young found this transition from her home church far from easy and the new repertoire difficult.

I had never heard all of the kinds of gospel music there really is. I was raised in a small country town and attended my church that was about one and a half miles from my grandmother's house. I was used to hearing the songs of gospel diva Mahalia Jackson, the legendary Mississippi Mass Choir, Dr. Watts, etc. Songs like "I Got A Feeling" and "Speak to My Heart" were a foreign language to me, yet it was a language I wanted eagerly to learn. Therefore, I practiced and practiced.²

The background of the choir members is very significant to the style of the choir and to its direction. The musical directors are drawn from this group, and ultimately they will have to please this group with their selection of material. The religious dimension to a gospel choir can lend weight to a conservative stance on music; a musical director risks an unpopular song being labeled, often jokingly, as "not of God."

On October 18, 1997, I conducted a survey of choir members asking them the denomination, the size, and the setting (country/ small town/ city) of their home church. Forty-eight people responded. The largest single group of denominations represented was the Baptists 22 (46%), next came the Methodists (Christian Methodist Episcopal, United Methodist, African Methodist Episcopal) 11 (23%), Pentecostals (Church of God in Christ & smaller Pentecostal denominations.) 10 (21%), and only 5 (10%) from other denominations, ranging from Seventh-Day Adventist to Roman Catholic. These figures are remarkably similar to the national distribution of African American church membership (Baptists 46.8%, Methodists 18.2%, Pentecostal 15.6%).³

¹ Interview with Mineasa Turner, 1/21/99.

² Brenda Young, *The Spirit*. undergraduate English assignment. 1998, p.1.

³ Lincoln & Mamiya, 407. Figures are from published reports of denominations 1989.

The largest proportion of members came from very small congregations: 26 (54%) reported the normal Sunday attendance as being under 100, and of those 15 (31%) were under 50. This experience of the majority is in stark contrast to 11(23%) whose churches boast a regular attendance of well over 200. The largest was the Mississippi Boulevard Christian Church, which number between 7,500 and 10,000 every Sunday!

The locations of the churches, as one would expect, correlate with the size of congregation. 19 (40%) are in the country, 13 (27%) are small town, and 16 (33%) are based in a city. These figures reflect the rural nature of Mississippi and a tendency for small churches to become family institutions. Typical of this is the Church of Jesus Christ, a Pentecostal congregation situated just outside Oxford, Mississippi, and attended by Gwen Smith who says of her church:

We're a very small family church. My father is my pastor, two brothers are ministers and my sisters, you know various people. We have about 25, 30 members counting the children.⁴

With such a large proportion of the choir coming from small congregations, the large size of the choir will afford many of its members a new musical experience. There were 74 choir members listed in the membership roster in the fall of 1997, with around fifty showing up for any one rehearsal.

The denominational spread of the choir is significant both musically and theologically. Each denomination has its own strands of the African American church music tradition,⁵ and each denomination has its own restrictions on what can or cannot be sung. The choir is not under such denominational constraints. Music styles range from Church of God in Christ (COGIC), to Church of Christ; from loud, exciting contemporary gospel to *a cappella* hymn singing.

⁴ Interview with Gwen Smith 11/21/97

⁵ Wyatt Tee Walker, *"Somebody's Calling My Name" Black Sacred Music and Social Change* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1979), frontpiece. Wyatt Tee Walker lists 15 branches of tradition in his "music tree" ranging from Cool Jazz to Pure Spiritual.

The Pentecostal movement has a huge influence on the contemporary gospel music scene. It is from the Pentecostal churches that most of the stars of contemporary gospel have come, including Andrae Crouch, The Clark Sisters, The Hawkins Singers, Kirk Franklin, The Wynans. "Their influence has been such that every contemporary gospel choir of whatever church is almost inevitably brushed with elements of Pentecostalism through its music and performance practices."⁶ This Pentecostal influence is very evident within the choir, both directly from the members who attend Pentecostal churches and indirectly from the music drawn from Pentecostal sources. Ron Briggs describes the music and atmosphere in a COGIC service:

It's just very rhythmic, it's very syncopated. It's meant to get your attention it's meant to grab you, it's meant to, put you on the edge of your seat. If you want to jump up and scream "Hallelujah" then wonderful. I mean by the time you through singing you really want to just... just.. If you could just fly straight to heaven and say, "God, thank you this is really wonderful." I always say if you've seen the movie *Leap of Faith* ⁷ that's it, that's us. Leap of faith describes my church to a nut shell.⁸

The survey suggests that this is far from the usual Sunday morning worship experience for the majority of students.

Those from Baptist and Methodist churches may well be part of a more reserved tradition, some using only hymns and anthems while others incorporate the more contemporary material in varying degrees, mindful of the older, more conservative members. Carol Young described the music at her Baptist church:

My church is pretty traditional, it's a small town, a small community so we don't do the stuff that UMGC gospel choir does because its not really accepted, the older people don't really like it.⁹

Monica Lester has a different experience in a Baptist congregation in Batesville.

⁶ Lincoln & Mamiya, 364.

⁷ *Leap of Faith* (1992) starred Steve Martin as a con man posing as an evangelist, featured performances by Albertina Walker, Edwin Hawkins and Patti LaBelle.

⁸ Interview with Ron Briggs 11/19/97

⁹ Interview with Carol Young 11/21/97

We have everything from the old traditional gospels that people sing, I mean they're real good, not just, ignoring the piano the organ, whatever, and just humming, like I guess the slaves did, but it is not the same setting. The old tradition, they really appreciate tradition and, of course the songs that we sing in the choir which are new, I guess the contemporary gospel.¹⁰

This diversity in worship styles in the older denominations has a lot to do with the size and location of a congregation. To perform a lot of the contemporary music a choir is essential. Lincoln and Mamiya, in their survey of African American congregations, found an averaged three choirs per church.¹¹

The geographical location of a church often influences the style of their music. An isolated rural community is more likely to have a conservative style of worship than an urban church, though this must not be stressed, as contemporary gospel is a very effective user of the mass media. Gospel radio stations carrying the latest urban contemporary gospel music can be received in the most isolated rural areas. Tiffany Norman recalled the role of the radio in influencing the music in her church.

My mom played piano and my brother played the organ and we had a gospel station. Any music that appealed to them, they would learn it and they would bring it to the choir, we would learn it, we would sing it and have it ready by Sunday morning. [In] the services we always sung one hymn each Sunday. So it was combined with songs we'd hear on the radio or old songs from their childhood.¹²

At least of equal significance to the rural/urban location is the regional location. Delbert Collins, a musical director in 1997/98, detailed the variations within the C.M.E. church, a traditionally conservative denomination.

When you go to the eastern CME churches, some of them are very Pentecostal in their approach and almost do no anthems or anything like that. Then in this area where the church began, in the South, it's a little more diverse. You get the anthems, you get the spirituals, you get the gospels, you get the hymns so it is much more diverse.¹³

¹⁰ Interview with Monica Lester 11/21/97

¹¹ Lincoln & Mamiya, 378.

¹² Interview with Tiffany Norman 11/22/97.

¹³ Interview with Delbert Collins 11/20/97

He argues that in areas where a denomination has been established for a long time the congregations are likely to have spent their worshipping lives within the confines of that tradition, and not to have experienced, or be tempted to incorporate, other musical styles. If this is true, then it follows that some of the students in the choir come from the most inherently musically conservative African American churches, as the South is heartland to most of the denominations represented.

The Pentecostal influence does not restrict itself to the realm of music; it is inseparable from the choir's theology and practice. This in turn influences the choir's style and delivery. It is clear within the first few minutes of a rehearsal that we are there for one reason only, to give God praise. A chorus, a reading from scripture, and a prayer comprise the usual format for an opening devotional. This is a standard formulae found in most African American congregations. During 1997, the rehearsals had a tendency to develop into "church", meaning they become entirely devotional in nature, with choir members exhorting their peers to live lives truly surrendered to God, not to "play at praise" as "you can not play with God." These exhortations often took a tone of morbid urgency. "Young people are dying, it's not just the old people anymore, thank God that we are able to praise him tonight because that could have been you , so don't play at praising him." There is an amazing intensity to the emotion. On every occasion in which the rehearsal took this form, *falling out* and *shouting* took place. *Falling out* is the collapsing in a faint under the overwhelming presence of the Spirit. This is usually preceded by shouting, which I have seen take two forms in the choir. The first is associated with "country" or unsophisticated churches. Therese Smith, in her study of a rural congregation in Mississippi, describes the phenomena:

During the shout the person seems to lose control over his body. Usually he/she will fling his/her arms about and shake, and the effect is often so violent that the

ushers try to hold the person down to prevent him/her from hurting him/herself or those around him.¹⁴

The second is slightly more controlled, and takes the form of paroxysmal dance, which is likely to send the dancer, oblivious of surroundings, crashing into furnishings and worshippers. This dancing is associated directly with, as Lincoln and Mamiya note, "the rhythmically accentuated gospel songs performed by... the Holiness-Pentecostal churches."¹⁵ As the choir members are exposed to ecstatic charismatic practices, a number may be experiencing them for the first time. Although Pentecostals are in a numerical minority, their spirituality is the dominant one publicly expressed within the choir. In the fall of 1997 the advisors feared that some members from non-Pentecostal backgrounds may have felt excluded.

Our primary student directors are very Pentecostal and they really use that as a way of shaping the choir and trying to shape the spirit of the choir, even the performances of the choir. They tend to seek to minister by word in the middle of a ministry by song. It is very Pentecostal in nature. So that really shapes the choir in a way that is comfortable for some and liberating for some, but really uncomfortable for other people. I think students are maybe uncomfortable, but not so uncomfortable that it's too much of it. Everybody's scared to say, "It's too much spirit" because it labels them in a way they don't want to be.¹⁶

The statistical breakdown by denomination of the choir suggests that non-Pentecostals were not being driven off in any significant number. The Pentecostal style is clearly attractive to the students.

The standard of musicianship within the choir is extremely high, as is the confidence in performance. Both these factors effect the repertoire of the choir. The directors do not rule out songs for fear that the choir will not be able to sing them. "A little hard work and cooperation and this choir can learn any song,"¹⁷ is how Gwen Smith summarized the situation.

¹⁴ Therese Smith, *Moving in the Spirit. Music of Worship in Clear Creek, Mississippi*. unpublished Ph.D thesis, University College, Dublin, 1988, 61.

¹⁵ Lincoln & Mamiya, 365.

¹⁶ Interview with Dr. Ethel Young Minor 10/31/97

¹⁷ Interview with Gwen Smith 11/21/97

The context of gospel music is the church, and in this institution children grow up listening to hymns, spirituals, gospels and anthems. The music becomes so familiar that on a number of occasions I have heard choir directors telling the sections to "pick out" or "listen out" for their harmonies, when only the melody line has been played. This familiarity with the musical tradition often astonishes white members of the choir. Andy Beaird was suitably impressed:

Well some things that stuck out immediately was the fact that there were so many of the songs that everybody knew in the choir, and [yet] it was very obvious from talking to students they came from many different backgrounds and many different areas of the State and even the country. That on a dime they could pick up and sing a song and all be in sync and it would sound unbelievable.¹⁸

Without exception, every one I have talked to has gone to church from infancy, and with this attendance comes exposure to music. Lester Green gives an insight into this upbringing in the following vignette.

I've an aunt that used to sing in the choir and I wanted to go and sing with her. And I remember during offertory in church trying to walk up the stairs to sing. I couldn't have been no more than five. I couldn't even get to the choir 'cos I was real short. I don't remember talking too much but that was my first [attempt] to try to sing in the choir. I didn't actually get to the choir stands, some one came and carried me back to my mother and my grandmothers. I didn't make it but I attempted to get there, and that's my first recollection of a choir.¹⁹

Youth choirs are an established part of many churches; in fact they are often the main focus of the youth ministry of a church, with a child's first public performance taking place there.²⁰ This regular performing from an early age is the source of the choir's confidence. Tiffany Norman explained:

I remember my first solo was *Away in a manger*. I had to have been like six, seven, and I had to stand in front of the church and sing it. I was so scared you know, but I guess the boldness of my singing now comes with experience, you know. It wasn't that I started just singing boldly, it came with experience.²¹

¹⁸ Interview with Andy Beaird, 2/2/99

¹⁹ Interview with Lester Green 10/28/97

²⁰ Lincoln and Mamiya, 312.

²¹ Interview with Tiffany Norman 11/22/97

With this exposure to gospel music from infancy comes not only confidence, but also experience leading choirs. Dee Thomas, the choir's musical director from Fall 1998 had just such an upbringing.

My first memory of performing in church was the song called *Please Be Patient With Me*. I was five at the time. They had a program and they called and asked me if I would sing. And my mother said "yes she will sing." I didn't get the opportunity to say whether or not I wanted to sing so my mother actually gave me that engagement. And I remember singing this song and the whole church was standing up. I think that was the first time I'd ever performed in the Baptist church, as far as singing a solo by myself.

I've grown up in the Baptist church all my life. I sung in the choir as a little girl. I think I started of at the age of four, I started leading songs. I started directing my choir at the age of twelve. I directed the youth choir and then up until the time I got ready to leave for college I was director of the mass choir, the sanctuary choir.²²

As well as musical training within the church, many in the choir have been taught music at school, have had instrumental lessons, sung in school choirs, and played in high school orchestras and bands. The choir members in the music department at the University are not the only people with classical music training. This diversity of musical experience gives the choir an ability, if not the desire, to perform a range of styles. This was demonstrated conclusively on November 14, 1997 at the choir's fall concert, when the choir sang *I Will Give Thanks* by Rossini, accompanied by a chamber orchestra, comprised, in the main, of choir members.

The way UMGC is experienced by audience and choir members is shaped more by the musical directors than any other member, even the president or advisors. In the fall semester 1997, when I first joined UMGC, the choir had three directors and one assistant director, and between them they chose all the music and ran the rehearsals. That first semester in the choir I decided to interview all four directors, asking them about the factors which influenced their choice of music for the fall concert. Their answers concentrated on the following areas: personal denominational tradition, academic musical

²² Interview with Dee Thomas 1/16/99

training, contemporary gospel recordings, and the spiritual/emotional content of the music.

Gwen Smith, a native of Oxford, Mississippi, grew up in her father's church. He is the pastor of a small Pentecostal church, part of the Church of Jesus Christ. The youngest of six brothers and four sisters, she is part of a family with a strong musical tradition.

I have six brothers and three older sisters, everybody is older than I am and the girls do all the singing and the guys do all the playing, every guy plays an instrument, and my Dad sings. We come from a family of singers that go back to my great grandfather.²³

Growing up she never learned to play an instrument, it being accepted that only the men played. She sang in school choirs from third to tenth grades where she picked up the rudiments of musical notation, though she is quick to point out she is no expert. Smith has sung in church, "as long as I've been able to stand in front of a mic' where they can actually see me, probably since about five." Her home church sing traditional songs, which she describes as, "praise songs, they're sort of like singing hymnals but we don't actually have a book in front of us. It is sort of like singing from memory." From the age of fifteen Smith has been the Director of The Church of Christ's national youth choir, who sing at the denomination's conventions, large gatherings throughout the Southern states. This choir sings mostly contemporary gospel, which Smith distinguishes as the "Contemporary Urban Style." Smith is, despite her limited experience of different denominational traditions, open to a wide range of styles. She sees that the popularity of the modern Pentecostal music can crowd out other traditions. Smith, more than any of the other directors, brought songs to the choir that she considers to be of spiritual value and purpose, a testimony of her faith. She described the way she picked the song *More Than I Can Bear*:

I picked that song because at that time I was going through a lot, and then I had a friend who was also really having a really bad time and a bad identity crisis sort of

²³ Interview with Gwen Smith 11/21/97

thing going on. And God just sort of put that song in my spirit, and then at that very time it was time for us to pick songs for the choir and I felt that if that song did that much for me and my friend then I could only imagine what it would do for the choir. And it was a song that they had to really think about because we as University students go through a lot, and I think if we stop and just realize, "OK, whatever I go through it is nothing compared to what God went through, and he won't put any more on me than I can bear."²⁴

Ron Briggs is the energized front man of the choir. His directing style is frenetic and highly entertaining. Born and raised in the COGIC tradition, Briggs grew up in Memphis, the home of the COGIC denomination. He sang in church choirs from an early age, but he has also been classically trained.

[My] first school was Overton Junior High for the creative and performing arts. So that's when I fell in love with other music, meaning classical and hard rock and country. I mean I like it all, country, I'll listen to *every thing*. I really think, and this is just my opinion, a true music lover has to be that way, you have to like everything.

Mozart is my favorite, I mean in terms of me understanding how things work within music, definitely, that part really helped. I mean music theory, learning the fundamentals, the basics of things, and now I can take music and I can read and write in it and I can understand it.. and it's just neat, it really is.²⁵

While Briggs' experience of other musical styles and knowledge of music theory may inform his directing, this was not evident either in his choice of material, or in his directing style. Briggs' style is pure COGIC. When I asked him the difference between the music of his home church and the music of UMGC the answer was, "There is no difference." He imposes his spirituality on the choir and on any audience. At the 1997 fall concert, in the middle of a song, in tears, he took the microphone, and ordered Satan to leave the building.

Delbert Collins, from Oklahoma, was in his first year as a graduate student in the music department, working on a masters degree in choral conducting during the period he was director of the choir. At 31 he was nearly ten years older than the other directors. His Baptist and C.M.E. background meant he was the only non-Pentecostal director. Collins

²⁴ Interview with Gwen Smith 11/21/97

²⁵ Interview with Ron Briggs 11/19/97

graduated with a degree in music from Lane College in Jackson, Tennessee. His approach is that of a classically trained choir director. On occasion he brought sheet music to rehearsals and sometimes selected songs that were outside of the contemporary gospel canon. This set him at odds with those who simply wanted a Pentecostal style. Collins' classical approach to voice training was one of the causes of friction:

People just want to open their mouth and sing with no kind of approach, they just want to sing. "I've been singing in my choir at home, I want to continue singing within." not any kind of direction or any kind of a concept of what a good choral sound is.²⁶

A denominational style did not define Collins' approach, which combined with his musical opinions, proved to be unsettling for some. Ethel Young Minor, an advisor, summed up the situation.

I have no idea what Delbert's religious background is, which is a comforting thing for me, but I don't know what it is because he approaches the music in a professional manner, there is a spirit there but you can't place it with a denomination, and I like that spirit a lot. I think the students become suspect of it because of that need at a young age sometimes to label something, especially when you are 18, 19, 20 years old there is something that needs to label it in order to deal with it. And they want to be able to label him and they can't, it's just this person who teaches you what to sing and how you can sing it, even when you think you can sing.²⁷

Collins believed that as a university choir, UMGC had an obligation to strive for excellence and should have a diversity of material.

I don't think that just because we are doing something to lift up Jesus, that's kind of church related that we should abandon what it is that we learn in other disciplines. We should take the knowledge that we attain because that's initially what we're here for, for intellectual pursuit, and to help hone our skills and stuff like that. And if you just going to be satisfied with sounding and doing everything like you do at your church then why come together twice a week?

Because we are at the University of Mississippi or if we were at Rust or anywhere else, by the mere fact that you are in a position in higher education setting, people should always look to you for answers and a standard which they seek to attain.²⁸

²⁶ Interview with Delbert Collins 11/20/97

²⁷ Interview with Ethel Young Minor 10/31/97

²⁸ Interview with Delbert Collins 11/20/97

Lester Green, an assistant director to UMGC, had a COGIC upbringing in Buffalo, New York. A self consciously cool character, he described his own directing style in contrast to Briggs':

I'm not one who is going to get up there and just jump all around, or do what ever, to make them get that excited. I'm going to say, "I know you got it in you " So I'm going to work hard teaching the song. Plus I'm guilty of trying to be cool, so why get up there and sweat when I could just stand in one place and get you to do everything I want you to do.²⁹

Green is an eclectic, not bound by his denominational background, evidenced in his beliefs as well as his music. He described himself as, "kinda coming from an Islam Pentecostal Christian point of view. [I] believe both in Christ and the 5 pillars of Islam."³⁰ His choice of music comes from the contemporary end of the contemporary gospel music scene. Green, following the example of Kirk Franklin, looks to African American musical influences outside the church.

I like songs that start off slow and get you in the message, kinda like a jazzy seventies type of groove, because that's the type of music I like. I'm a believer in what you call the Hip Hop nation, the Hip Hop culture. Whereas our form of slow music of R'n'B is like a smooth funky kinda jazz where you just sit back to some Maxwell, something kind of groovy, something like that. But then we listen to the Wu Tang Clan or different things like that. So when I come at gospel I like gospel music that *grooves* that makes you just shake your head and you know.³¹

All the influences that bear on the choir are distilled and served up in performance. All except two of the thirteen pieces sung by the choir in the fall concert 1997 program were drawn from commercial recordings; this makes it is easy to pinpoint the denominational origins of the songs. The overwhelming Pentecostal influence on the choir's repertoire is apparent. No fewer than nine could be identified as Pentecostal in origin, of which at least six were COGIC.

²⁹ Interview with Lester Green 10/28/97

³⁰ Interview with Lester Green 10/28/97

³¹ Interview with Lester Green 10/28/97

The surprise of the night came from Collins' choice of a Rossini anthem. In rehearsal there was incredulity when the choir was given sheet music. Collins had to work hard to overcome antipathy towards his piece of music. Once the choir learned the piece and could sing it then the mood became more accepting. Monica Lester, an alto, talked about the piece:

At first I didn't want to do it, but actually I fell in love with it because I listen to classical music, but I've never participated in it, singing it. I've played it cos I've played piano and cornet but I've never sung classical music.³²

The audience received the anthem, not as incongruous, but in the same way as the rest of the material, applauding and encouraging the soloist as she sang.

The three main musical directors originally intended to have their material equally represented on the program. The directors had a profile of the type of songs they wished to see in the program, some *a cappella* numbers, and a couple of anthems, but the final choice rested on how well the choir sang them. Both previous experience and enjoyment of the Pentecostal-influenced, contemporary gospel contributed to the choir's enthusiastic performance of these type of songs in rehearsal, thus ensuring their selection for the concert. On the night, Briggs had 6 songs, Collins 3, Smith 3, and Green 1.

One of the most interesting things to emerge from the interviews was the love of the "old style" songs. These are not necessarily old or traditional compositions, but songs written to evoke that style. When asked about their inclusion in the program, the directors explain them to be included to keep the older people in the audience happy. Collins: "I chose it because it is more traditional approach and I knew that even if the choir didn't like it, that some of the older people attending the concert would enjoy it."

Smith: "We have to sort of adhere to various audiences needs, you know and we have those old people in the audience who aren't used to the contemporary urban style so you have to go back and do something that they can relate to." What is fascinating is that

³² Interview with Monica Lester 11/21/97

the traditional style songs are, in fact, among the choir's favorite. Collins almost apologized when asked which church music he most enjoys: "I'm just really silly, I just am really moved by older people, who are fiery in their approach." Briggs, who is well aware what the choir responds to, described how he chose *My Soul Got Another Dip*.

Now that song got in because of the beat. That's just old fashioned church, just teaching you guys was like everyone was wide awake and you guys really got into it. You see I liked it, I like it when you all jump into things, I don't have to beg you see.³³

There is a strong attraction to material that is reminiscent of the old tradition that many of the choir grew up with. This cannot simply be attributed, as Collins did, to a desire to sing familiar material because it is less musically challenging. At work is the power of association, primarily with childhood. Tiffany Norman, who sings the solo in *My Soul Took Another Dip*, describes choosing songs for the choir with Briggs.

I can be with Ron and we will be listening to a whole bunch of music, like music like from when we were little kids, and we can remember the sound, you know of listening to the radio, and you'll be like, "I wanna sing that."³⁴

More significant, and less tangible, is the way these older songs evoke a sense of hard times overcome, Ward's music of survival and self affirmation. Smith alludes to this:

There is so much contemporary and Urban out there we've sort of gotten away from those songs that really touch peoples hearts, that helped people get through life back in the day, you know. I think we've gotten away from that, you know we've moved on to this really fast pace, snap your fingers sort of thing, and that's all well and good but yet I'd like to see us go back and get those sounds.³⁵

This "old style" material, as Smith starts to consider, is closely linked with the traditions of the African American Church. From my observations over numerous performances and innumerable rehearsals, this material draws the strongest emotional response from choir and congregation. In the fall of 1998 the choir performed at the choir day of Jeffries Chapel, Abbeville, Mississippi. During the song *I'm On My Way to*

³³ Interview with Ron Briggs 11/19/97

³⁴ Interview with Tiffany Norman 11/22/97

³⁵ Interview with Gwen Smith 11/21/97

Heaven, the director Ron Briggs started shouting. Dancing uncontrollably he was quickly surrounded by members of the church to prevent him from hurting himself or knocking over the fittings. The choir, with a grandstand view of the proceedings from the choir stand, kept repeating the vamp "Get right, Get back." Finally Briggs came to himself and brought the song to an end.

This response to the music, entering into what John Michael Spencer calls "trance possession,"³⁶ is part of the African American spiritual tradition. The "old style" gospel songs are perhaps better able to evoke this tradition; it is impossible to say whether this is from the associations they draw from the congregation, or from their rhythm, tempo, and song structure themselves. Thomas Dorsey, the father of modern gospel music, had equal difficulty when trying to explain this response to the music.

That moan... is just about known only to the black folk. Now I've heard them sing like this when I was a boy in churches... They'd get more shouts out of the moans than they did sometime out of the words. It kinda brings the people up, puts them on their feet, starts them thinking. After a while it hits the heart and they start to holler, hollering "hallelujah" or something like that. I don't know what it is, but there's something to it that. I don't know but there is something to it that nobody knows what it is; I don't know."³⁷

Ethnomusicologist Samuel Floyd traces this intertwined musical and spiritual tradition back from Dorsey, through the Azusa Pentecostal revival of 1906-09, back to the ring shout and the brush arbor religion of the slaves. These slaves drew on their spiritual heritages from Africa, traditions characterized by "Dance, Drum, and Song."³⁸ In choosing to retain this material in their repertoire UMGC are not simply pleasing older members of the audience, but are tapping into the potent stream of the African American musical/spiritual tradition.

³⁶ John Michael Spencer, *Protest an Praise: Sacred Music of Black Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), p.135.

³⁷ Michael Harris. *The Rise of Gospel Blues: the Music of Thomas Dorsey in the Urban Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p 22.

³⁸ Samuel A. Floyd, *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting its History from Africa to the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) p.19

Since these first interviews with the musical directors the choir has been involved in recording a CD. Songwriters contributed the songs which had not previously been recorded. This was a major departure for the choir, which up until that point had almost exclusively sung material learned from the commercial recordings of other choirs. This new material dominated the choir's repertoire for the spring and fall semesters in 1998. During this period the choir appointed new musical directors. The choir's executive committee under the guidance of the faculty advisors decided to have only one director and one assistant. Dee Thomas, a junior, and Mineasa Turner, a graduate, filled these positions. This was a change from the previous set of directors, as the new directors were Baptists rather than Pentecostals. In their interviews neither of them felt that the music the choir performs had changed. The breadth of material that the choir performed at the fall concert in 1997 is found in the songs selected for the CD; the choir recorded contemporary gospel, gospel blues, a spiritual, and a classical eight part anthem.

While the new material introduced by the recording project was not a stylistic departure for UMGC, a consensus suggests that the sound of the choir changed. Lloyd Holmes described the change:

Confidence was boosted, and with a boost in confidence came a change in sound. I think you have more and more people coming who are trained vocally in the choir. With that comes a better sound. I think the choir now expects to sound better. A bigger sound, a brighter sound, a fuller sound.³⁹

Neither director had illusions as to how this change had come about. Dee Thomas described the process of the choir gaining in confidence.

I think [the recording project] strengthened the choir in a lot of areas. At first I don't think we believed in it. We didn't have faith that it was going to happen. But once we started getting into it, getting the actual feel of everything it became exciting. It helped out because during the recording I felt like the voices were strengthening as well. The different sections, every one was putting forth their own part, they were all trying to give more than what they had given in the past. At first you couldn't hear from people, but when it came time for the performance everyone

³⁹ Interview with Lloyd Holmes 1/21/99

started putting forth their own weight. It brought us closer together too, I felt like it did.⁴⁰

Mineasa Turner saw an increase and maturity amongst the choir members.

I think there have been a lot of changes musically. We know now that we can't just show up and sing something. It used to be, "Well we're good" but now we still feel like we are good but we know that it takes rehearsal to remain good at what we do.

During the recording session there were many hours of time and work put into it. We were there until 1 o'clock in the morning and you know we'd be, "We're having choir rehearsal tonight at 9" and we'd stay to 1 on a Friday night. Or we're having choir rehearsal at 9 o'clock on a Saturday morning. It takes a lot of dedication to get people to come and do something like that. I think at first it was more, "We're recording, we're recording!" but then when a lot of people found out how much work, time and effort had to be put into it and that we couldn't just turn up and sing like we always had, then there were those people who weren't very dedicated didn't come back. They came back just for the recording to sit in the audience and listen to the product that had been produced over the time.

The changes that have taken place are the maturity of people, dedication of people, basically saying, "this is important, this is a priority. So me going to this party is not important, me going to do this is not important. The choir and doing God's will for this choir is what's important now."⁴¹

The University of Mississippi Gospel Choir is shaped by, and in turn shapes, the African American musical tradition. I have shown that the forces influencing this tradition include: denominational conditioning and tradition, size and location of home church, academic Eurocentric musical tradition, and the Pentecostal dominance of contemporary gospel music.

The CD project increased the dedication of the members, and the raised expectations of their own performances strengthened the choir. The music they produced was still an expression of the backgrounds of the members. While trying to emulate the sounds heard on contemporary gospel albums from the likes of The Colorado Mass Choir and Kirk Franklin, these students recorded their own commercial album, which will in turn influence other choirs. This is the modern face of an oral tradition.

⁴⁰ Interview with Dee Thomas, 1/16/99

⁴¹ Interview with Mineasa Turner, 1/21/99

CHAPTER VI

RECORDING NEW TRACKS

Two Photographic Documentaries of the Choir's Recording Project, Spring Semester 1998.

The recording project culminated in the live recording of the gospel choir on April 8, 1998, six years to the day after the choir had sung in Fulton Chapel under Reggie Turner's direction. This was just one night in a semester of seemingly endless rehearsals and hard work for the choir. As the recording project had progressed with me as the chair of the project committee, and as I continued my research into the history of the choir, I wondered how I should go about documenting this major event in the life of the choir.

I realized I was far too busy helping with the organizing, production and post-production of the project to have the time to do any good documentary work. I have to overcome several hurdles to do "good" documentary work; as a member of the choir I am the product of a different country, culture and religious denomination than everyone else. Compounding my cultural incongruity is my proximity to, and knowledge of the project; this colored my perception of the whole rehearsal, recording, and production periods. More importantly, I was so closely associated with the project that I would be lacking any shred of objectivity.

I was concerned to record how members of the choir saw the process of rehearsing for and recording an album. I approached Lloyd Holmes, the choir advisor, and Chris Ware, a senior member, and asked them to take photographs of the choir over the following weeks. I explained that they would pick out the pictures that they felt told the story of what had happened and then I would interview them and ask them to tell me

about them. The results of this process appear below. Neither Ware or Holmes would consider themselves photographers, as is witnessed by the mixed quality of the pictures.

There is some scholarly work on the interpretation of candid photographs, most on images of the family. Julia Hirsch, in her work on family photographs,¹ analyses the roles that people are seen to be portraying in the composition of the photograph. The pictures here present people in role - musicians are seen at instruments, technicians at sound boards and choir members singing. As the photographs are linked to the text it is evident that the pictures in themselves do not construct a narrative; instead, both Ware and Holmes use the pictures to accompany their own verbal narratives.

In combining their photographs with an edited transcript of the interviews, I am hoping to present a voice other than that of the documentarian. It is important to consider what sort of narrative is being constructed. In both cases the model being employed is a *Testimony Narrative*. A testimony is a regularly featured part of low church, Protestant services. Titon in his study of an Appalachian Baptist congregation devotes considerable time to the testimonies of its members.² The testimony pattern present in these stories is not a conversion narrative, but instead one of the returning prodigal. The form is:

- i) rebellion - the choir tries to pursue the project in their own strength;
- ii) humbling - things go wrong;
- iii) repentance - the choir is reminded of the spiritual nature of the task and their need to rely on prayer;
- iv) celebration - the choir's prayer and sincerity is rewarded beyond expectation.

The images of eating which represent fellowship and reward have strong resonances with the story of the returning prodigal.

¹Hirsch, Julia. *Family Photographs: Content, Meaning, and Effect* (New York:Oxford University Press, 1981.)

² Jeff Titon, *PowerHouse for God, Speech, Chant, and Song in an Appalachian Baptist Church*. (Austin:University of Texas Press, 1988), 374-407.

Presented here are two narratives prompted by photographs, the first from the perspective of choir member, the second from a person in a position of responsibility. These are two stories of the recording of a CD.

Interview with Chris Ware 5.11.98, Oxford, Mississippi.

I came to the University in 1995. My major is Criminal Justice and Political Science. I have been in the choir since I got here, three years.

I love gospel music, I love singing, and being in university the only chance I get to really have church is when I am in the choir.

I have been the vice president of the choir, I have been the chairman of some boards, I am a musician, I play drums, I sing first tenor also.

When I was taking these photographs I was trying to find the best moments, the moments that we have in the choir. Sometimes you can only see through the eye of another person, you can't see exactly what's happening in front of you, but take a picture and explain to people what is in the photograph, they grasp it much better.

(Fig 6.1) This very first photograph is one of the very first times we started practicing for the songs. It is basically while we were all learning the parts, learning to get used to singing *our own* material, stuff that has never been sung before, is very difficult. We are all used to singing O'Landa Draper, we are used to singing Kirk Franklin, but when it comes down to singing stuff that's brand new most of us were at a loss.

Ron Briggs is directing and Jason Clark is playing, he is one of our producers for this CD. Ron was ecstatic, this was a big chance for Ron to really show what he's made of.

(Fig 6.2) This is a picture of the mixed ensemble, we did a lot of the more classical, traditional sort of like spiritual stuff. Songs like *While the Blood's Still Running Warm*, and the other song was *Holy, Holy, Holy*. Those songs went over really, really well at the concert, like the original material, we had a hard time learning those songs but at the end. Jason Gordon is playing the piano for us and we have Linda, Carol, Ivy, Vinessa, Miranda and Dee.

Fig. 6.1



Fig 6.2



(Fig 6.3) The third photo is a picture of David our drummer (who plays for O'Landa draper) and Jason Clark, who is the head musician, and three of our Altos. This is the very first time they came to practice. Once they showed up we actually saw that this CD was really gonna happen, this project was happening. A lot of things changed for us, a lot of people got serious about doing their job.

[When they came to practice] a lot of eyebrows were raised and eyes were open, a lot of people started minding there P's and Q's. They wanted to be more professional. Not to say that they don't have respect for the musicians or directors that we have, its just that the sight of a new face, it does something for people, their attitudes change.

The girls loved them, any chance they had, when ever we were going out to eat to fellowship they went. We always had more girls than we had guys. Matter of fact, once O'Landa's band came in we had a higher attendance rate.

(Fig 6.4) The next series of photos is of our songwriters and our producers. This one is of Jason Clark, he is a keyboardist, he wrote the song *Send Up the Praise*.

I didn't know much about any of these guys, I just knew they were from O'Landa's band and I have a lot of respect for his music and work. And I said, "if they play for him they must be good and this album's going somewhere."

Ron Briggs graduated from the same high school as O'Landa graduated from and they are semi-good friends according to Ron. Ron used to be in his church choir and Ron got the word out in Memphis that we were doing the album, and his band offered to play and give us songs and stuff.

Fig. 6.3



Fig 6.4



(Fig 6.5). This is Chris Morris. He is a wild man. If you look at the photo it tells you everything. If you look at him in a live performance or at choir practice he acts the same way from practice to our CD recording to Tennessee Mass performance. All these guys are real nice guys.

Jason's style was more laid back, more calm, cool and collected. Chris's style is one of those people who would find a way to humor you and teach you at the same time. At times he was one of those people sort of like a father. You know how some parents will be your friend but also your authority figure, that's the type of a relationship we had. On our last practice before the concert we had a lot of people, while we were singing, they had the tendency to look toward the door whenever anyone came in [and take their eyes off the director]. He basically didn't threaten them, I believe it was a promise, it was a guarantee, if they were to look again then they wouldn't be singing. That cut out a lot of that!

(Fig 6.6) This is a photo of one of our song writers. He gave us the song *Tell Somebody*. His name is Donte Everhart. He came and taught a song and we didn't see him any more after that. After the time that he spent with us he left a good impression on me. A young guy, he is a student at the University of Memphis.

He didn't get such a big response as the other guys, the only reason was we hadn't heard of him and we didn't know what sort of song writer he is. He basically had to earn a little respect that night. The response to his song was mixed. I liked the song, I thought we needed to do something different to it. some people if they don't like the way something sound they don't put as much energy into it, and that's the problem that we had. The song's a good song just that certain people in the choir did not like it. After we engineered the song a little bit it got a better response.

From what I hear there are already two churches trying to sing the song. Some people who came to our concert, they listened to the song and they enjoyed the song. This guy

Fig. 6.5

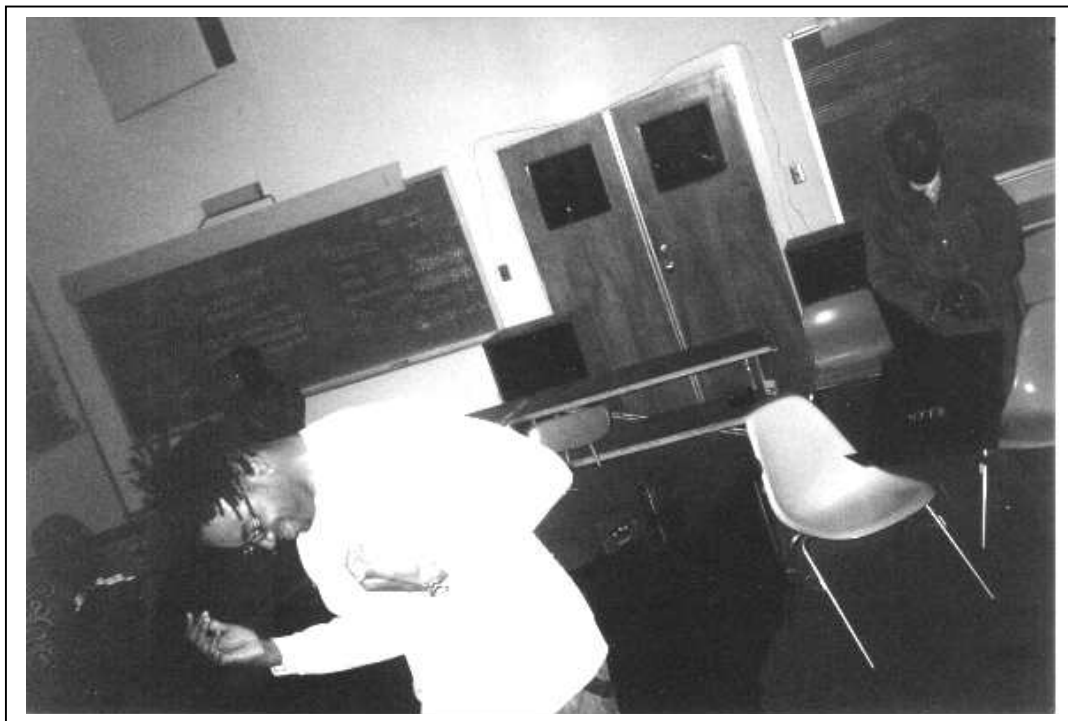
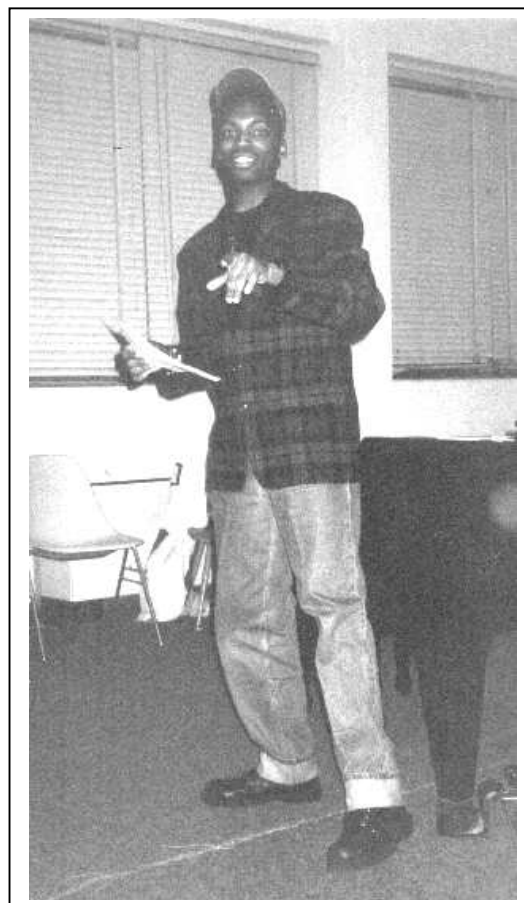


Fig 6.6



who talked to me, every time I see him he tells me "Man we doing this song, we trying to change it so we can get it right." and he asks me to come teach it to them and stuff. Overall his song went over well.

These were very late rehearsals. From our late rehearsals we found out how serious our choir members were, how dedicated they were to this project. Those people who were really dedicated, their grades suffered somewhat, if their grades didn't show it then their finances showed it because they skipped work, they skipped class because they were out so late the night before. It really showed what the choir was made up of. We were practicing from six to ten, then we had musicians and vocalists who stayed later than everybody else, or get there earlier. Really showed a lot of courage and a lot of determination on the part of the choir at that time.

At first, the very first feeling in the choir was, "We're doing a CD, yeah we got it." But then people started getting discouraged, once they saw how hard it was, once they realized how difficult it was going to be to do this. It wasn't like snap the finger and we go out and sing. The people who weren't dedicated in the beginning, they left. The people who didn't have the time to put into it, who were sincere about it, who really wanted to do it and they saw it was best for them not to come at all than to half step. They are still dedicated to the choir but they decided, "The best thing for me to do is to wait till next semester when I have the time to give." Even after they left the choir they always supported us.

(Fig 6.7) This little green man! This is the famous O'Landa Draper. He has been nominated for several Grammy awards and several Dove awards. He came one night with the band, which was a big surprise for a lot of us. I met him at the door, it was very late that night, about an hour and a half late and we were just getting ready to go. [the clock shows 9:15]

Fig. 6.7



I was just walking out the door trying to find them. I greeted him, shook his hand, a very nice man and I believe very spiritual.

He enlightened us.

He asked us a question "Why are we making a CD" Somebody answered, "Because we have a record deal."

He said, "That doesn't mean anything." He told us, "there are a lot of choirs out there that are just as good as us or better that have been out there for years and they are still waiting to be discovered." That opened up our eyes.

He told us, just because we had this record deal didn't mean we were going to make a record, and just because we made it didn't mean it was going to sell, and if it sold it didn't mean that people would be spiritually uplifted by it.

Once we got that grasped we realized, "OK we see where you're coming from, we will have to step up a notch." Matter of fact we needed to step up five notches I believe. We did exactly that after that night.

The fact that he turned up and gave us a pep talk, and that the pep talk came from him was an enormous boost for us. Emotionally and spiritually it lifted us up, it gave us a little more gas for the fire, it brightened us a little bit.

(Fig 6.8) & (Fig 6.9) These are pictures of our advisor Ethel Young Minor's daughter, Jasmine. Just about every practice we had Jasmine was there. She was like our little inspiration. She clapped and sang along with us. Dr. Young Minor was basically our strong spiritual advisor. She is a brilliant young lady, very spiritually and biblically inclined. She really touched us. Anything she could do to help you she would, if she couldn't she would find someone to. Also our advisor Lloyd Holmes who we don't have a picture of, he was the same way. Dr. Young Minor is an English professor, she teaches African American Lit', and Lloyd Holmes works in the financial aid department, he has counseled a lot of us.

Fig. 6.8

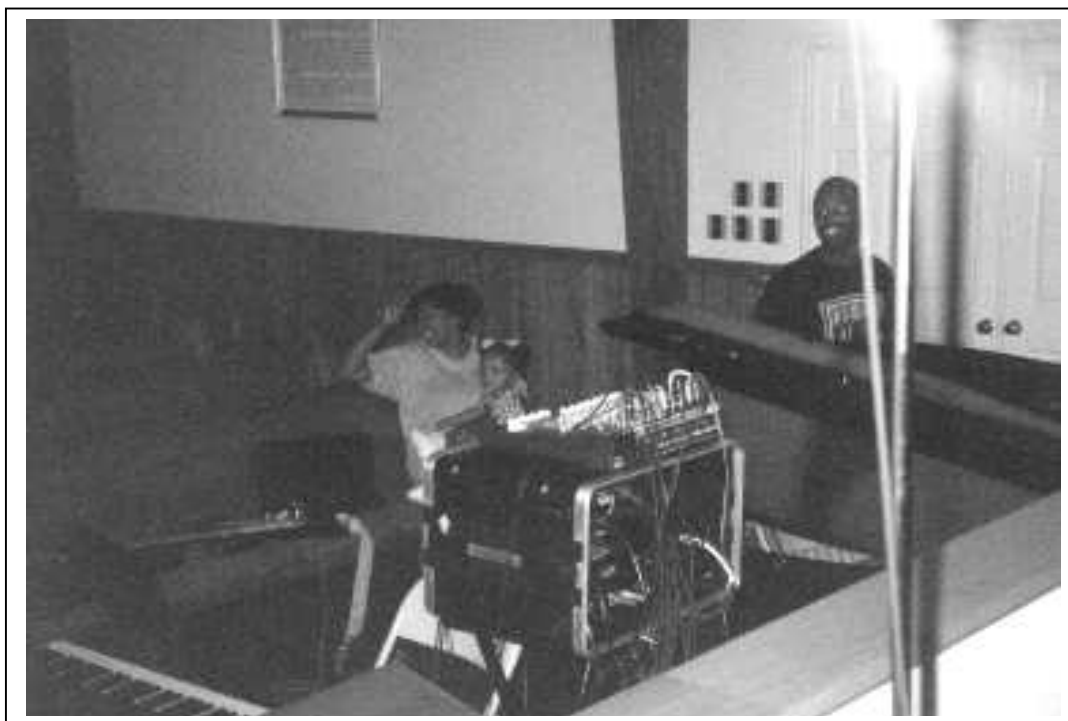


Fig 6.9



(Fig 6.10) This is the choir praying. This particular night everything seemed to be going down hill. Soloists couldn't sing, choir members were coming in later and leaving early, musicians not in sync, the director getting frustrated, choir members frustrated, seemed like everybody all around frustrated.

We had two students to pray, and Dr. Young Minor prayed and those prayers really touched, really helped, really uplifted us. It seemed like the Devil was trying to bring us down, and there's a saying that, "If the Devil's not messing with you must not be doing anything right, he already has you" And he was really testing us, we overcame. Prayer was very instrumental, through prayer all things are possible. That night was really something, it was a real strain even on myself. I am the type of person, you hit me with things it just rolls off my back and I keep going, but that night it stopped me for a while, that's how bad things really were. After that things started to turn around, to pick back up.

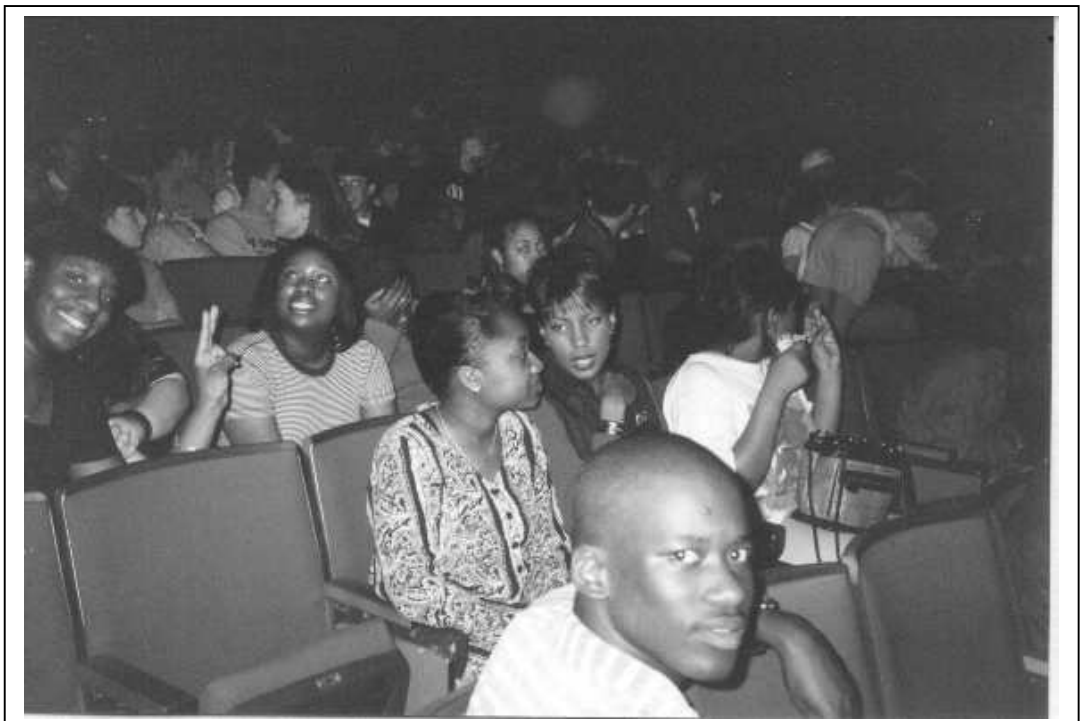
(Fig 6.11) This is choir members sitting out in the audience at, well we called it the RUF [Reformed University Fellowship] function, but it really wasn't RUF, it was Christian fellowship, all the different Christian organizations on Campus got together to sponsor a program in which a former mobster gave a speech on how he found Christ and came out of a world of sin.

The choir is waiting on it to start, we started about thirty minutes late. It was publicity for our concert. A lot of the tickets that were sold were sold to these students. This night the Ladies Ensemble performed [first] and they didn't do the job they'd normally do, when the choir got up to sing it really wasn't no choir, it was an ensemble. Here was another point where certain members of the choir were discouraged about certain things. Ron Briggs before we performed, before we ministered that night, he got up and gave a short talk and told the audience that we were doing a CD and that we were having a hard time, and that the choir needed to know that the University supported us. The University, not just as an institution, but the University as our friend and our family was behind us in this project. After that we sang our famous song *What if God*.

Fig. 6.10



Fig 6.11



There were mixed feelings, some people felt exactly the way Ron felt, others felt exactly the opposite. Whether they felt the same way or not, a lot of people felt that it wasn't the right setting to discuss our discouragement or our downfall in a public setting with that many people who don't know us personally but know of us.

For me it is like a tough love thing, he didn't care who knew. If a child's acting up in a grocery store my parents would wup me right there to teach me not to do it again. To me, that night taught the choir that no matter where we go as a choir. If one of us mess up we pick them up and carry on, we finish our job. That's what I got from his speech. Ron did a good job.

(Fig 6.12) This is a picture of us gathering at the local Captain D's. This was the day after we did the Black Alumni Concert. This day was when we sung with the Black Alumni Reunion Choir. They didn't have as big a participation in the choir as they expected. The day before at our concert Reggie Turner [Alumni Choir Director] asked us to sing in it. We had about fifteen choir members volunteer. That morning we learned every song we were supposed to sing, which was a real blessing and basically a miracle. We did a great job. When it was all over we gathered at Captain D's.

(Fig 6.13) This is at Shoneys, one of our favorite places to eat after eight o'clock.

Normally we get there late, about ten, don't get served till ten thirty and the owners expect us to be finished by eleven so they can close. I called Letrice's name just as she was getting ready to fill her mouth up. She told me she was going to get me for it later.

Fig. 6.12



Fig 6.13



(Fig 6.14) This is Jauna Chatman and the soprano section. Jauna was one of our lead vocalists and at the same time she more of a spokesperson. She got up and gave a heart felt little pep talk. She told us that we were doing this project, it was just round the corner and "we all need to stop acting colored, even cu'dn Pete, Andy, Jack and Michale." She included all of us. She is one of those people who finds a humorous way to bless us. "You doing wrong, you know you're doing wrong, don't do it no more."

We had a lot of people who were talking [during rehearsal], a lot of people whose energy level just dropped. This was the night before the concert and we'd rehearsed Monday from six to ten and we practiced Tuesday till really late. We rehearsed the Friday before from nine to twelve and then that Saturday morning we had to get up and rehearse from nine thirty to eleven thirty. For a lot of us our energy levels were gone basically. There are very tired people sitting down on the floor, we had people nodding off trying to get some sleep in before we get back to practice.

Ron had gotten discouraged again; when Ron gets discouraged he goes into this tantrum basically. This particular night things weren't going the way he wanted them to go, not to say that he has to have his way. Then Chris [Morris] stepped in and he was upset also, but the choir basically listened to him which made Ron a little bit more upset. When we have new faces things seem to go their way, people tend to recognize their authority much better than someone who has been there for years. Jauna stepped in, gave us our little pep talk and she took care of that.

(Fig 6.15) This is of Joe, Andy and Larhonda. This year the choir has had more non-African Americans. We had four, Andy, Jack, Pete and Michale. This choir is not an African American choir, it is a gospel choir. When people hear the word "gospel choir" they automatically think "black choir" That is what we are trying to get away from. I know that certain people in the University don't believe that the choir should have any other race except black in it. But my thing is that we are all children of God, the choir is here to sing the Good News, God's message, we are here to minister. Sometimes, I am

Fig. 6.14



Fig 6.15



just like my dad, you use different baits to catch different types of fish, the choir being diverse, being multi-racial, we can minister much, much better than if it was all black, all Chinese, all white.

There have been "specs", basically when cu'dn Pete joined it was another spec and Pete worked his way into the choir and got to know people.

Some [more white] people joined because of the background that they have. Andy, for example, is really outgoing, he is involved in several on campus Christian organizations, the gospel choir is really the only Christian singing group on campus and Andy told me he loves to sing and that was his main reason for joining. The simple fact that Pete was already in it made it just that much easier for him to join. Michale, she is cool, most of her friends are black, she talks black she hangs around so much. Jack is very cool, he hangs out with a lot of us and stuff.

Me personally I like to see the choir get this much more diverse. I think us being more multi cultural we go a lot more attention from the campus media, from staff and faculty and students alike. They thought "hmm, that black choir ain't all black." That is the type of God I serve. He doesn't discriminate against race, age, sexual orientation or whatever. He is colorblind. That is the type of person I strive to be. I'd like to see the world color blind.

(Fig 6.16) This is us just clowning. I think the musicians are playing some kind of fast, upbeat, shouting music song and every one is clapping, they did it to get us energized again.

(Fig 6.17) This is the women's ensemble. This years women's ensemble did a great ministry from the fall to the spring concert. They lost members during the spring, but found people to replace them and carried on. This is a picture of Mineasa Turner, Miranda and Linda. They were three of the Altos for the ensemble. Delbert Collins is at the organ, he is teaching them their parts.

Fig. 6.16

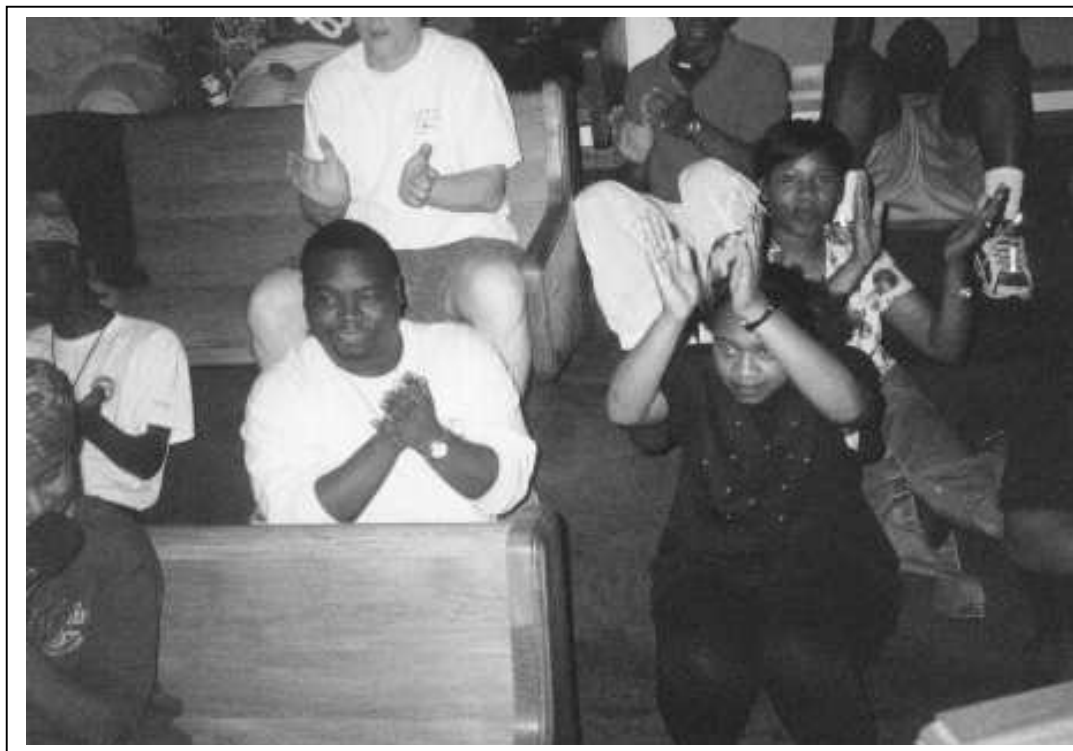


Fig 6.17



This was the last night and at the last minute they decided to change the parts a little bit [to *Good to Me*], all the women were rushing and frantic learning new parts they were supposed to be singing. This is basically the first night they had sung with the music. Gwen, one of our former choir members, her brother wrote this song.

(Fig 6.18) Then they head to learn the lead vocal parts. This is Vinessa singing her solo part.

(Fig 6.19) This is when the whole band started up and the women joined in. Once they heard the music they were excited to hear it they were like, "Wow! is this what we are going to singing to?" This was at about eleven thirty or twelve o'clock and we end up staying another hour afterwards.

(Fig 6.20) They got in sync with the music and they just let God have his way, they ministered. We were in a church but we weren't *at* church. There wasn't an audience, but this particular vocalist, Letrice Stegall, she tends to minister no matter where she is at. I believe if the girl was singing in her car and she was going up her road she is ministering, even if it is just to herself, that's the type of person she is. All the women did a great job at the concert. Maybe next recording they'll do a recording of their own and we'll do a recording of our own, you never know. Maybe they'll be the next Witness, or the Clark Sisters or something.

(Fig 6.21) This is the opening number at the concert itself, the audience is standing up, it was *Lift Him Up*. The choir is alive for the first one, also we had to stop and start over. Prior to this Dr. Young Minor got up and gave a little talk to the audience that it was a recording, that it was bound to happen. They supported us at every stop, they clapped and encouraged us.

Fig. 6.18



Fig 6.19



Fig. 6.20



Fig 6.21



(Fig 6.22) This is a picture of our trio [R to L] which was Delbert Collins, Christi Richardson and William Graves. William is one of our song writers. This particular song is *I Love You Lord*. William wrote this song, it was one of those laid back, contemporary R'n'B type of songs. In its own way it ministered. The choir is diverse in its singing techniques. Directing is Ron.

All three of them did a great job, they were feeling it. They knew exactly what they were singing about because the Lord has done so much for us. Sometimes we fail to realize it. It is like our parents, they spend thousands and thousands of dollars on us to raise us up, and sometimes we may tell them that we love them maybe once or twice a month, maybe once or twice a year. It is the same way we treat God sometimes. We must realize who our help comes from. This song is basically saying Lord I love you for everything you've done for me.

(Fig 6.23) This song was a duet with Mineasa Turner and Vinessa Merrell. The title was *Spirit*. That song itself, when I think about that song it sends chills, I meditate on the words. There is a message in the words, but when you add the vocals, the way that they express their feelings about the presence of the Lord. During the singing of this I even saw a couple of musicians stop playing and raise their hand, it was just that type of song.

Not pictured we have other soloists. We did a spiritual *While the Blood* the soloist Shay Reel turned the house out. My Mom was there and she said she saw this little old lady was walking towards the back, she was on a cane, and when Shay started singing she stopped, dropped the cane and turned around. Shay's voice is like a Mahalia Jackson, it is one of those backwoods church sort of voices, with the wooden floors and you've got tambourines and no mics and stuff, just the old piano. That sort of voice, it is one of those real strong voices.

Fig 6.22



Fig 6.23



(Fig 6.24) This last picture is of the choir doing *Come to Jesus*. The soloist is Tiffani Norman the choir president. This song is more of an altar call song. That song within itself, to me, defines the whole purpose of this University choir. Everybody in the choir is not solo material and not everybody in the choir is background material, but for the simple fact that they are willing to let God use them. They came to Him just as they are and God used them. God can work wonders.

At the end of this song Dr. Young Minor gave a very inspirational prayer. People talked about that prayer for weeks. As a matter of fact my Mom she is still talking about that. Like I said she is very biblical, very inspirational, she is a very strong woman. I think she is the spiritual backbone of this choir, even though we have a lot of other spiritual people in the choir, she is the spiritual backbone. Over all this concert and this choir has been a blessing to myself, other choir members, it will minister to thousands and thousands of people once the CD sells because God has a mission for the choir and it is up to us to accept it to carry it out and finish it. Me for one I plan to do it.

Fig 6.24



Interview with Lloyd Holmes. May 16, 1998

My role with the choir is to serve as the advisor for the group. Hopefully the choir members see me not only as an advisor, but as a mentor. Our advisors have to be in a position where the choir members can look up to us. My role is to be a friend when I need to be a friend, a disciplinarian when I need to be a disciplinarian [laughs] even though sometimes we don't like discipline, I think in order for the gospel choir to run effectively we need to be a disciplined group. Sometimes there needs to be someone who brings about order.

I transferred to the University in 1990, from Itawamba Community College, and at Itawamba I had sung in their gospel choir for both years that I was there. When I came here it was important to me to be a part of that group.

When I got here Reggie Turner was directing the choir and he happened to be the resident advisor on my floor. He came down and said, "Oh, we're having a gospel choir rehearsal on Monday night, the first one of the semester, I know you and Ernest," Ernest Stevens was my room mate, "are going to join the choir." I went to the choir and it was exciting. It was a different experience from what I had been accustomed to. From my church choir moving to Itawamba it was different, from Itawamba to the University of Mississippi it was a different experience because we'd had leaders in Itawamba's choir but Reggie Turner just seems to have been different. He was an individual who had a very clear idea of how he wanted the choir to be, and so he worked towards that.

I think my aim with the photographs was to catch a moment where the photograph could tell a story. If the photograph did not tell the story of what the choir was doing then if someone looked at that photograph they could come up with their own story. Just as an artist may paint a picture and the picture says one thing to the artist, for the individual who purchases the picture it may say something else. I think with photographs there were moments that I thought were important to me and I tried to capture some of those

moments. Now there were times when I seemingly took a picture for the sake of taking a picture.

(Fig 6.25) For me from the very beginning of this project, when you came to me, for me this photograph shows the young lady playing with the guitar and just having so much fun, it is sort of like a joke. In the beginning when you came to me to talk about the gospel choir recording a CD I said, "this is just a joke" and so for me I just went on, "OK. Yeah that's fine, we'll record a CD, we'll find enough money to record a CD." And I am like, "this is the University of Mississippi and there is no way in the world we will find enough money from the University of Mississippi to record an album" So this photograph for me, deep down within in the beginning, I guess my pessimistic self said, "OK, I've been at the University for quite some time and there are constraints that a lot of people haven't quite figured out." And I felt that once you ran into that brick wall and said "OK we can't get any money," then hey, we'd end up recording maybe next year, not this year. Because I didn't think we were going to have enough time to prepare for a CD, you hear people doing things for a couple of years getting ready for a CD and how could we record a CD in six months? So it was just a big joke to me.

(Fig 6.26) The picture of the choir, and even though this was a day or two before the recording, the photograph of the choir members massaging each other. I think once the project became real for me, I think just as this photograph shows that the group members are massaging each other, I think all along through this project we end up having to console each other, because there were really difficult times throughout the entire process. If not for some individuals [laughs] there were some difficult times for me. I think the photograph speaks of unity and if we had gotten too bent out of shape about things then the project could not have become a reality. Just as we have the hands on each others shoulders, you know, "Hey you're there to lean on me." I think we had to realize that early on in the project, and once we realized that we attempted to move forward.

Fig. 6.25



Fig 6.26



Once we began the recording, after it became real to us, and truly I don't believe it became real to us until March, mid March to be exact, really when I thought it was too late to become a reality. At the point where I really got nervous, was really afraid that we weren't going to have but two songs that would be CD ready. I think all during the process, even though we knew that we were going to record, knowing something and doing something are two different things. We knew that we wanted to record but then our actions said something different.

We really had to lean on each other because in the process, rather than our focusing on the CD, we focused on several other things because I think some individuals in the gospel choir felt that Black History Month, the choir provided music for various events, and those events were more important than getting ready for the CD.

I think we had to struggle through that, and then once we'd got that we end up having to learn some songs for the recording and having to deal with various teaching styles, it was difficult. I think while learning songs, some individuals who teach songs to the choir feel that while we are learning a song, you would hear, "when I hear the name of the Lord I just get so excited and you should get excited." And you had some teaching with that mentality, yet you had others teaching, "Get excited after you figure out what notes you are supposed to be singing." The choir having to deal with all of those issues and I think whenever there is a group of people you are going to have personality issues. When you are in a leadership position, when you find that people don't like your style, sometimes it is difficult to teach them. I think we all had to realize if we are going to make this happen *we* have to make this happen.

(Fig 6.27) I think the photograph with Ron [the choir director] and Ron only reminds me of times when we. First of all Ron didn't write the songs and so a lot of times the individuals who wrote the songs wanted them to be a certain way, but Ron ended up having to teach the things he remembered or the things he had recorded. There were so many times in getting ready for the CD that we would go to rehearsal,

Fig. 6.27



we wouldn't have a musician, and so Ron had to attempt to step in and serve as director and hit the notes on the piano. His sitting at the piano, Ron is not a pianist and I think there were times he was uncertain as to the notes say for instance he didn't know what the chord was. My seeing him sitting at the piano not knowing how to play it, that's just how it was with the choir sometimes. Sometimes we just didn't know what was going on. I think that was from the advisors on down. Not only was I frightened, I think some of the other choir members were.

Not only was I frightened that this thing was not going to happen, some of the other members of the University were sort of scared that it wasn't going to happen. The gospel choir seemingly, this year just really hit a new level and I think since the beginning it has truly continued to excel. I think in the past the gospel choir has been good, but I don't think it has been ready for a recording. I think quite often we get caught up in, "this group was a mediocre group in the past so it has to be a mediocre group now. What has changed? They don't have any more money than they used to have, you have the same caliber of people coming in seemingly, so why would the choir be ready to record a CD now?"

I think the choir was ready because I think when you expect a lot from people then people attempt to give that to you. The choir could have been just as it was last year or the year before or the year before, but then this year I think your having stepped into a tub of hot water. The thing really became a reality for me when the student development grant came through and we got that thousand dollars. I am like, "darn, there not going to give us this thousand dollars," and so when they did give us that thousand dollars, and I wrote the letter and said, "Oh gosh darn it, I don't even know why I am lying on this letter," I knew that the choir was better than it has been but I didn't feel that the choir was ready to record a CD. I think that if some one looks at this picture of Ron they'll think he plays the piano, and I think that I as an advisor had to play that same role with the recording, had to try and get people to feel that I felt the choir was ready.

(Fig 6.28) This photograph of Delbert teaching, he has all the sheet music, and in the past the gospel choir has been so used to singing Soprano, Alto and Tenor, three part harmony. I think with this recording, just as the entire recording thing was a new experience, I think for many of the people in the choir doing eight part harmonies that was *definitely* a new experience. So I think this entire recording we stepped into new territory, and I think his teaching us those songs, especially with them having to attempt to read music. There were times when he said, "OK, I know some of you can't read music, but if y'all see the note go up then you sing a higher pitch, don't keep singing the same tone!"

It was like, "OK choir we see the train is moving towards recording, it is not something that you have done, but lets jump on the train and go."

(Fig 6.29) There were so many times that we as a group were really frustrated, or individuals were frustrated. I think this picture speaks to some frustration. You see Greta, looks like she's just rubbing her head with her eyes rolled to the back of her head. Then you have Derek who is like, "Stop, I don't have my part," and there were so many times when we were so gung-ho about things sounding good that we forgot that we didn't know the parts. You have Lester, seemingly the basses are trying to learn a part yet the tenors who are sitting right with them, they're having a party up in the choir stand, and it speaks to the times when the advisor had to come in and be the disciplinarian.

(Fig 6.30) This is the advisor Dr. Ethel Young Minor and her baby Jasmine. I chose this picture because all of us had to attend rehearsals, as advisors if we are in a leadership position we have to set an example. Rehearsals got extremely long. We are slated from 6 to 7:30, then you had choir rehearsal going until 8:30, 9, then probably some 9:30, 10's. To me this photograph is like one of those long rehearsals where we as advisors had gotten tired, yet you have a baby here who is just full of energy. For me the baby can represent the end product because once we have finished recording,

Fig. 6.28



Fig 6.29



Fig. 6.30



we were so tired , but we were so energized afterwards. We could be just dog tired but when one of those songs would sound extremely good you would have the energy of that child.

(Fig 6.31) This is at Second Baptist, a night or two before the recording. After we have gone through all this tiring stuff we get to Second Baptist and BAM! You have the music and it sounds really good, and you have this burst of energy, especially on the Monday night before the recording, which was on Wednesday. But then you ask, "Is it just nervous energy?" Because Tuesday night, it was different. It was one of those situations where everyone has just gotten scared and typically when we get scared we get frustrated and we choose to stress out about things. It was a really, really, really stressful night. We had to really pray about it because it was hard.

You had the directors screaming at the choir, you had choir members fussing at the directors, it was just like cats and dogs. It was a God awful night. It is one of those nights where you say, "if the recording is going to be like this maybe we shouldn't record," but then of course you know you've just come too far to turn around now. I think we left that evening with a bunch of frustrated people because the night didn't seem to go as it should have gone.

We get to the recording and it is just *fabulous*. Of course I am just a nervous wreck. What was making me even more nervous was the choir was more calm than me [laughs].

After we had the little devotional thing, the ladies ensemble came out and sang the first song, I knew it was going to be a blessed event. All of us had prayed about the recording and I think whenever you say, "OK Lord we're not doing this for our glorification but we are doing this to glorify you." I think when we are sincere when we say things such as that, He really shows what He can do, and He shows how little we as humans know. With that first song I thought, "OK Lord, you doing your thing," because there were too many times when not other people thought the choir wasn't going to be

Fig. 6.31



ready, there were times when I thought the choir wasn't going to be ready. Truly the thing was for me, "OK Lloyd you are one of the advisors of this choir, if this choir is not ready that is going to make you look bad, you haven't done what you should have been doing as an advisor, you should have been certain they were ready." As advisors we are the official representatives of the choir to the University. If the Sesquicentennial, the Alumni and whoever had given all this money and the choir was just God awful, they wouldn't have talked to the choir, they would have talked to Ethel and Lloyd.

I think from the beginning when we talked about this project as not for us but for the Lord, I think if we had gone in with a different attitude, then I don't think the project would have been as successful. I think even toward the end a few people lost sight of what the project was really for, but with a group of people you are always going to have some one say, "Oh we recording, we gonna be famous"

I think we as a group grew towards realizing what the project was for. It wasn't to serve as a recruiting tool for the University, it wasn't to get the University of Mississippi Gospel Choir known across the Nation. It is good that maybe that will happen, but we have to realize this is for the glorification of the Lord.

(Fig 6.32) I think the photograph of the drummer David, even though this is in rehearsal, you can see how seemingly he has become one with his instrument, how the things that he is doing is just flowing through him. On the night of the recording we as the choir members were instruments and I think we truly played our instruments well. I think the Lord uses people, and I think he used the choir that night. We became one with those songs, while the choir was singing they seemed to have forgotten about self. I have never used drugs but when people talk about getting high, it was just like a high, because having gone through ups and downs and ups and downs, seemingly when you saw the choir on stage someone in the audience would think, "this choir has never gone through any down times, I know they just have to be like this the entire time."

Fig. 6.32



When the choir got on stage, none of that could have happened. It was just one instrument being played. It didn't seem as though anyone was competing with the next person.... it just leaves you speechless. I had such a rush I guess I sort of... I can only imagine how a parent feels when their child does something that is really, really good. For the first time I thought of myself as a parent, seeing my child do something that will make the world proud.

I think after recording the CD I think the thing that I I guess before we recorded I thought, "Thank God, when its over it is going to be *over*," but then the very next day I had Lester.... I didn't have like a days break. By this time I had come down off of my high and I just wanted a day to myself. I felt like since January, when the choir had come back, I felt my life had been given to the choir. If we weren't in rehearsal.... you know we were in rehearsals Monday nights, Tuesday nights, Wednesday night, sometimes Thursday, sometimes Friday. When we didn't rehearse I had you or Lester coming in to talk about the CD or somebody calling about some money or something. Yet just like you see these students in this van, it was like a van load of people just came. People were so excited about the project, I truly felt not only was I flooded, run over by people, I think the choir members were run over by people wanting to talk about the CD. It truly was an experience.

For me it was a once in a lifetime experience. I know now that recording is an exciting thing, yet there will never be another first time for us. I think even after having gone through everyone's initial excitement we still had to realize we had some traveling to do. We still had a long road ahead of us, maybe not as far as we had traveled. We still had bargains to make, had terms and conditions that we had to meet. So after the recording this picture (Fig 6.33) has some of the choir in a van headed to Jackson to do the overdubs. That picture reminds me there is work to do. Even once this project comes to an end, we still have to work because when you get to a certain point you really don't want to regress, you want to progress.

Fig. 6.33



(Fig 6.34) This is a photo of MALACO on a brick wall. I guess even at the night of the recording when we had all of that sound equipment, mics here and mics there, and trucks with all these instruments in it. I guess when we got to Jackson to do overdubs, I said, "darn, we're at MALACO records. We're big time!" I guess I sort of, when I pulled up into the parking lot and saw Malaco on a wall, almost the high of the night of the recording came back.

(Fig 6.35) We get into the studio, there Jerry Masters is, and to me he was just an Albert Einstein. There he was sitting in front of this big old sound board or what ever it is. I took that photograph because he was a genius, I thought sitting there at that thing you could just see his wisdom. He didn't have to say a thing, you could just see how wise he is.

(Fig 6.36) We get in there and there Albert Einstein is, and then the choir goes in and they go into the studio and every one attempts to get comfortable but it is still a nerve wracking thing. The choir are in front of all these microphones and for me it is just exhilarating.

(Fig 6.37) After the choir does their overdub then you and Delbert and Jason would come in and here it is BAM. It was like, "This just can not be the University of Mississippi Gospel Choir because I have been with this group since 1990 and I know this just has to be someone else." It was one of those situations I am so excited I just think I am going to hyper-ventilate. For me, when you guys would come in to listen to the songs, "how can they stand there so calm just listening to this thing?" I just thought I was going to explode yet this photograph, you just look at it and you all are *just calm*. To me it shows no emotion whatsoever,. To me that's a good thing, the producers have to be able to do that, you have to separate your excitement about something in order to make sure that your coming up with the best product. One of the things we wanted from the beginning is to give the best product we could possibly give.

Fig. 6.34



Fig 6.35

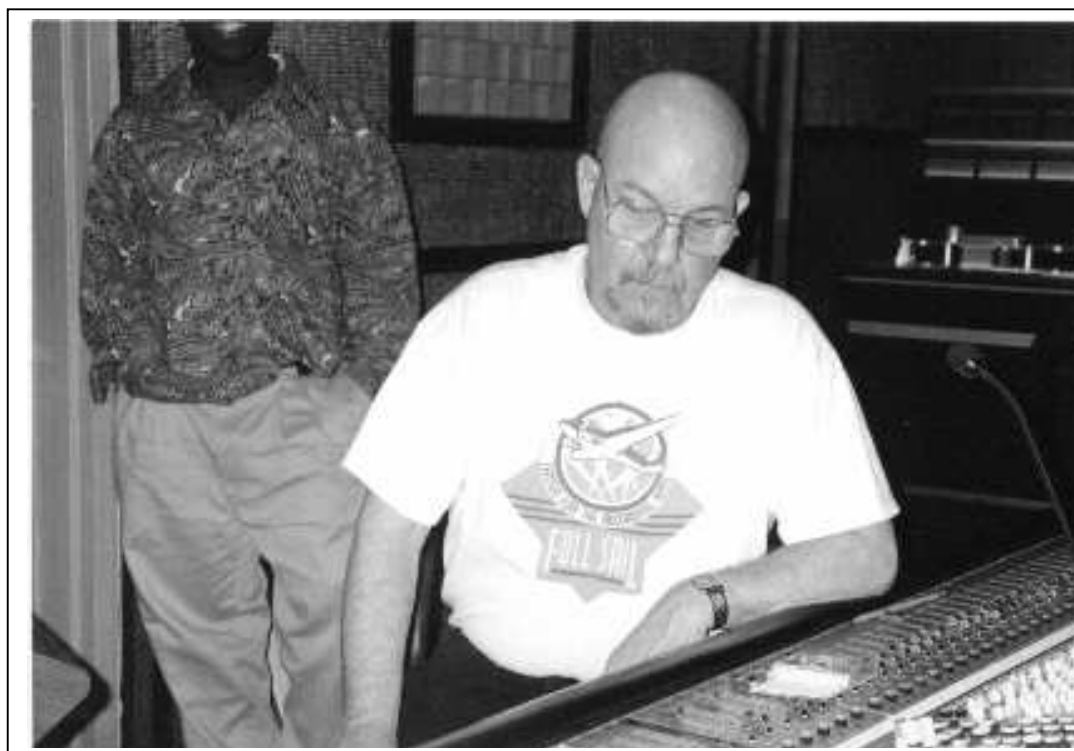


Fig. 6.36



Fig 6.37



This photograph shows that even though we get so excited, "This is going to be really good, this sounds so good." the producers are like, "That sounds good, but we need to go back and re-do this." I think for me we were not accustomed to listening. I think sometimes we hear but we don't listen, that goes with this and other things.

(Fig 6.38) I think even after the Jackson trip, even after some of the choir members have gotten to the point of, "OK, we're done," I think for you and Jason, a lot of you alls work is beginning. I think even after we left the big group, this photograph shows us we're moving back down to that small cohort. Just as this product began with Pete Slade, seemingly this project is ending with Pete Slade because y'all have to go to Jackson and do the Mixing. In the beginning it was you and Bill Ferris one on one, and now it is coming down to you and Jason, a one on one thing. I think this photograph sort of speaks to that.

(Fig 6.39) Like I said, the thing has come down to, hopefully you won't feel you're on your own now, but I think that just as in the beginning it was you working while seemingly other people slept, I think in the end the group may feel, "We've done what we've got to do, the CD is ready, there is nothing for us to do but rest."

We are a group and we should be willing to wake up and realize our work is just beginning. This photograph tells us where the choir is right now.

Fig. 6.38

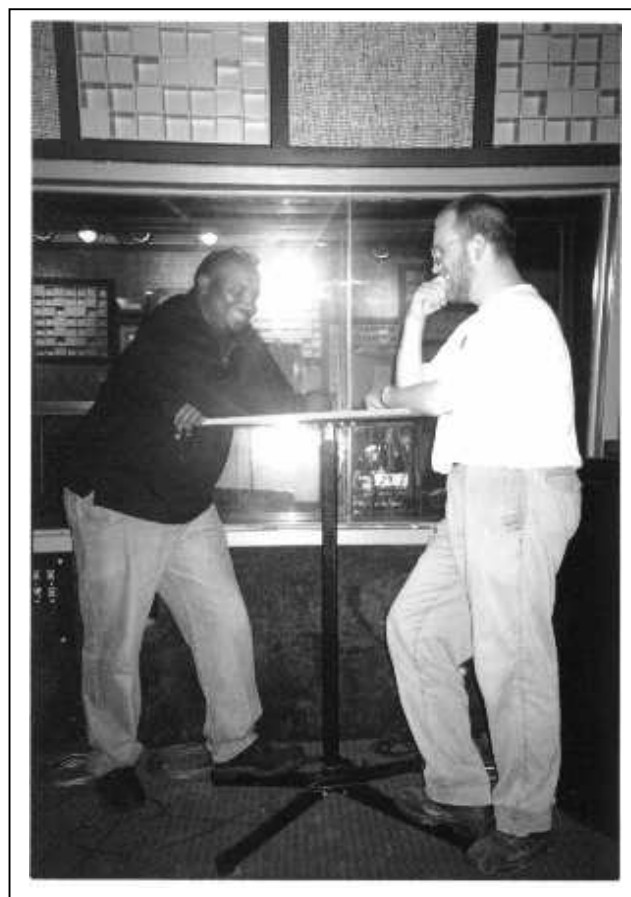
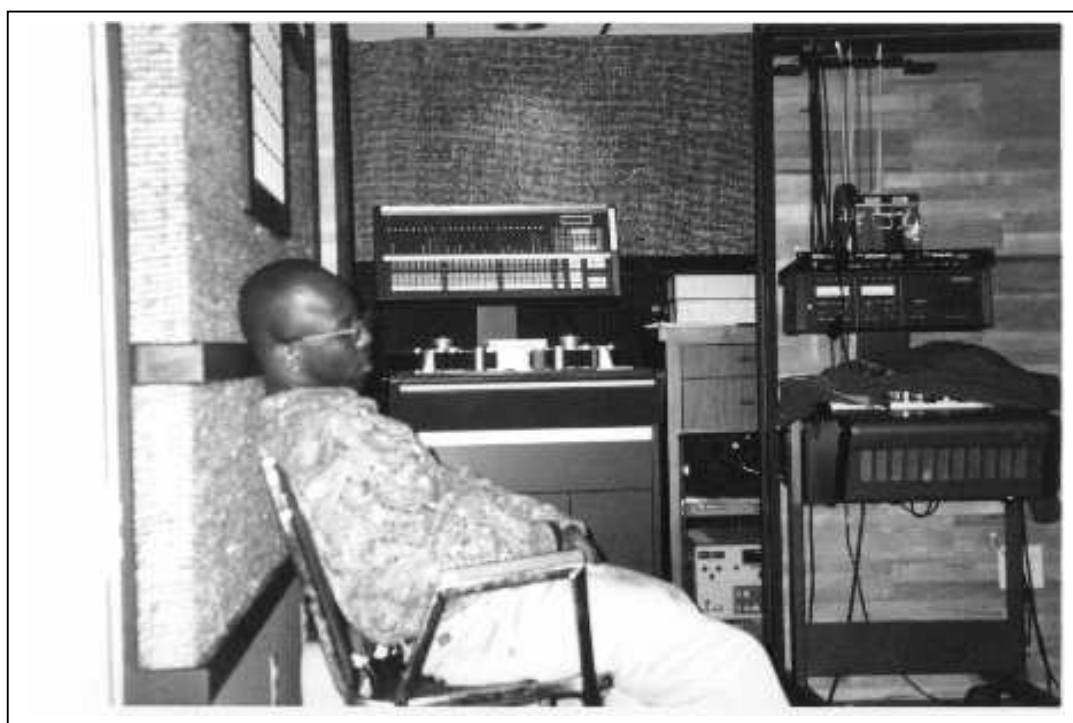


Fig 6.39



(Fig 6.40) I end on this photograph because just as you find the members in this photograph being fed, for the entire semester, we as a group, even though we may not have known it, or didn't feel it at times, because all during the recording some of the choir members, we tend to get a little judgmental and a lot of people attempted to feed a lot of people their own personal opinions in the name of being spiritually led to feed. But in all of their feeding I don't think many people were filled with food that was filling. The night of the recording it was some spiritual food for a lot of people. The recording taking place, and it becoming a reality, that was some spiritual food that some people won't forget. I think some people's lives may have been changed because of that night. Just as this photograph shows these people eating, I think this recording is going to be food for many people. The recording will touch people we don't know and be in places that we don't know. We were provided with a meal that night that was just right.

Fig. 6.40



CHAPTER VII

A CORNER OF A FOREIGN FIELD

An Account of My Involvement with the Gospel Choir and a Consideration of the Methodology of Field Research.

I joined the University of Mississippi Gospel Choir (UMGC) in August 1997. My reasons were straightforward. Having sung in a gospel choir in England for nearly two years, I was looking for the opportunity to continue to sing in a gospel choir. My motives for coming to Mississippi were connected with gospel music, but when I joined the choir I had no intention of doing anything other than singing, as my research interests lay elsewhere. Since then, my involvement with the choir has moved from simply singing. I facilitated the recording of an album of commercial quality, currently being signed to Malaco records, and chose to write my thesis on UMGC.

My enjoyment in singing in a choir is, in no small part, connected to the privilege I feel in being a participant in a culture very different from my own. I have come to understand my place in this, or any, black gospel choir as that of a *guest in another's culture*. This model has proven to be increasingly important as my role within the choir has become more complicated. As I became a fieldworker within the choir, I had to ask myself whether my documentation was changing the choir. I had to understand myself as both an insider, affecting the choir, and as an outsider recording that change. In both capacities I was working as a facilitator. In the *guest* model, I like to think of myself as the guest who has helped buy the food, but has not altered the menu, and may even help with the washing up!

My approach to working and singing in the choir is influenced by my experience as a community worker, and specifically by the year I spent studying theories of community work at Ruskin College in the "other Oxford." Fundamental to the practice of modern community work are the concepts of facilitation, empowerment, education and advocacy. Good community work aims to establish groups within the community, facilitate the setting of their own agendas and goals, and empower the group through education to be able to continue without the community worker. Occasionally the community worker takes on the role of advocate for the community groups when they are, for some reason, less able than the worker to negotiate with the power structures.

A second influence on my behavior has been my limited experience on the edge of the music industry in Britain. As an assistant manager of a rock band in England, I helped set up a small music promotion and management company *Two Hoots Music*. My partner was the M.D. of a large company and was very product (rather than process) oriented. In our spare time we worked hard to secure a record contract for the band we managed. We copyrighted their material, arranged studio time, researched CD production and organized concerts and promotion. When I came to Mississippi I had this commercial music experience at the front of my mind.

This chapter considers my developing role within the choir, measuring my actions and their results with the mixed tool bag of community worker, fieldworker, and musician/producer.

My role started to change in the choir following a concert in Jonesboro, Arkansas. I revealed my hand as a researcher in the coach traveling to the concert, by passing out a questionnaire for members to complete, and in recording the concert using a Professional Walkman. The concert was on October 18, 1997. I had been in the choir for two months and was still regarded as something of a novelty. My nickname of "Cu'dn (cousin) Pete" was well established. There was a demand for copies of the tape I made, and my impression was that it was unusual for any one to record the choir in concert. (I later

learned that recordings are usually made of the large concerts on campus.) A number of choir members commented that, "it sounds like a real tape." I made inquiries of the choir's committee members if they had ever considered the choir being recorded. They answered that they had talked about it, but it was too expensive. Ron Briggs, the musical director, laughingly told me that if I wanted to see if it was possible then to go ahead, but his tone let me know he thought I was wasting my time.

The following day I rode into the Delta with Charles Wilson and Bill Ferris. Ferris seemed interested in the suggestion of recording the choir, promising to make representations to the administration of the University for funding. He also talked about contacting Tommy Couch at Malaco records to see if they would assist in any way. I talked with the choir's faculty advisors, Lloyd Holmes and Ethel Young Minor, who agreed that I should pursue these possibilities. We agreed not to tell the committee anything until there was something to report. I felt that my acting independently of the choir was justified as I had received a commission from a representative of the committee (all be it joking), and I was reporting regularly to the faculty advisors.

Clearly my position as a Southern Studies graduate gave me access to Bill Ferris, who signed a letter I wrote on his behalf, which opened doors in "Student Life" and the alumni association. My use of the Center's letter head (which I mistakenly considered to be legitimate, as I had the backing of the director) added an air of respectability and legitimacy that a letter from the choir, a student organization, would not have had. My experience of writing grant applications and project proposals placed me in an advocacy role for the choir. At the end of the fall semester the choir had secured \$2500 funding for the project and a promise from Malaco to help produce a good recording and pressing at cost. In addition they were offering us one of their producers, and free mixing and mastering time at the studio in Jackson. I had also had meetings with Gloria Kellum who had suggested that the Sesquicentennial committee might be interested in supporting the choir.

With the ground work for the project in place, a recording of the choir was now possible. I was very concerned that the decision making regarding a recording, whether the choir would even pursue such a project, be handed over to the committee. I met with the committee in the last week of the fall semester 1997 and reported on my work of the preceding month. Everyone was behind the decision to go ahead with the recording, and Delbert Collins, the head musician, suggested the date of April 8.

It was a fundamental principle for me that the choir would choose and shape the music selection on the CD. It was important that what was recorded was representative of the choir's repertoire and sound. This documentary instinct was tempered by my desire to have a product that would be of interest outside of the choir's friends and family, something that would generate attention from the music press. I helped steer the committee into the decision to only record original material, and Delbert Collins quickly owned this idea. Committee members went on Christmas vacation resolved to ask song writers of their acquaintance for material. The choir committee took responsibility for the CD project, appointing me as chair of a sub committee. The committee made it clear that the choice of music and musicians, and readying the choir for the recording, was the responsibility of the musical director and head musician (Briggs and Collins). I was encouraged by the ownership of the concept, the assumption of responsibility, and the initiative of Briggs and Collins. I was trying to balance empowering the group (community work), limiting impact on the tradition (field work), and at the same time having the best possible end product.

Colleagues in the Southern Studies program goaded me leveling accusations of my being a stereotypical white record producer who wishes to exploit African American musicians. This caused me to examine my motives behind initiating this project. The salient points in my defense seem indisputable. I was a participating member of the choir, and at my joining I had no inkling or desire to record an album. My overwhelming motivation in pushing this project through was, and is, to see the choir gain recognition

from the University and to influence the Universities minority recruitment. What I was working on was in no way revolutionary for the choir as gospel music is no stranger to professional recording. Indeed all the material the choir performed has been introduced from commercial recordings, and the choir aspires to the sound on those discs. I was acting as a facilitator for the choir, exploiting my past experience, age (I am ten years older than many of the members), contacts, and resources as a graduate in the Southern Studies Program.

In this list of assets at my disposal I fail to mention my whiteness. This is not an oversight. As one of the only whites in a black choir I am clearly aware of race . My greatest fear was that choir members would feel I was wanting to take charge because of my perceptions of the traditional power differential between black and white. My second great fear was that white onlookers would say, "It took a white man to get them organized." To try and avoid this I kept as low a profile in the rehearsals as possible. When I met with the Sesquicentennial committee, public relations department, and technical director, I made sure that I went with members of the sub-committee. I took care to keep the president and the advisors of the choir informed of all the developments and I took all the decisions to the committee. Despite my efforts my motives were called into question by some choir members. I was unaware of this until Lloyd Holmes told me about it in an interview.

There was a person or two who were worried, "Now why is Pete doing this, is he doing this because he wants his name out, what is this white guy going to get from this? Apparently he is doing this so he will benefit from this." My response was, "Well if he's doing this and not benefiting from it he would be foolish." Because I think whatever it is that we do we need to receive some benefit from it. If it is detrimental to us, why do it? I had to tell a person or two, "What you need to ask yourself, you don't need to be worrying about what Pete, or what whoever is going to get from this, What you need to be worrying about is what can I put into this project so I can get something from it." I think that was a thing that a person or two had to be told.

I think it was shocking, not only to some of the choir members, but also to members of the University that "here is a white guy going out on a limb trying to get

the gospel choir recorded. The gospel choir is a predominantly black choir, why is this white guy doing this?" That is reality.

I owe a great deal to Lloyd Holmes and Ethel Young Minor because they trusted me enough to support me in this way.

The question of the significance of my whiteness upon my role as advocate for the choir is very complex. Certainly some choir members saw the increasing involvement of whites in the choir as contributing to the new found cooperation with the administration. I would be naive to think that my race had no influence on the decision makers we were lobbying. This, after all, "is reality." How it may have effected the decision making is purely speculative. I don't believe there was a conscious support for the project because of my whiteness, but being the same race and sex (with the exception of Gloria Kellum) as those with whom I was negotiating support must have been an advantage. Probably as significant as my whiteness was my Englishness. Being told how good the gospel choir is by a white Englishman, is going to grab more attention than a black Mississippian saying the same thing, simply because it is unexpected.

In a more simple way my whiteness may have changed the environment I was studying by challenging the choir's stereotypes of whites (many of which I have come to hold myself!) and in setting a precedent for white participation. While there had been a history of whites in the choir, it seems to have been a rare occurrence. My second semester in the choir saw four whites join, an unheard of number; their reasons for joining were different, but I cannot lose the suspicion they were told it was possible to join because there was "a white guy in the choir already." There have been concerns raised to Lloyd Holmes, the faculty advisor to the choir, regarding the new white people, of whom I am one. When I asked Lloyd about my presence in the choir, his answers were very interesting. Our conversation highlights the segregated nature of the University of Mississippi Campus, and the distrust and stereotyping which reinforces and perpetuates the situation.

How was I perceived being white, and being English?

I think for some people your being in the choir was really a change, especially the freshmen who had not experienced there being a white person in the choir. I think there were some people for whom it may have been an adjustment. I think it is one of those things, even though I hate a lot of stereotyping, but that's a reality, I think a lot of people saw you as being different from other white people. I think the truth of the matter is that probably some people felt when they got in the choir, "Gosh darn it, the University of Mississippi is a racist institution." and I have heard some people say "There is not a single good white person at this institution." and I think some people may have felt that, however, I think the thing that you did, I think that some of the stereotypes they may have had, I think you came in to break them down, and broke them down. Of course you moved from being, "Pete the white boy" to being "Cu'dn Pete." So I think you broke some of those barriers down.

I was surprised this semester when we had 4 more white people join.

We had some people who are concerned that with the choir recording, and with the recording being a success that we are going to have a flood of white members who are going to try and change the choir. I think that was a concern, of course that wasn't my concern, but it was for some people.

I think it is a concern

You've told me that it is a concern of yours, and I guess one of the reasons it doesn't concern me, I think the gospel choir has been an outlet for African American students for the 24 years that its been here. I do however feel that whether you are black, white, green or purple, I think if you have the opportunity to sing praises and you want to, you should be given that opportunity. I don't think there should be any one who can say, "Peter Slade you can't sing with the gospel choir cos your a white guy." I truly disagree with that.

Now I think that maybe the choir has been a spiritual outlet for some African American students, now if you have an abundance of white members in the choir, then you need to be an outlet for the group. I don't think that as a group you can say you are just going to provide a service for these people.

I think it was easy for people to say "your not white, you're English." it was easy for people to say you're an exception to the rule. Some one like Andy however fits the stereotype.

I had someone come to me, because you had Andy, you had Jack, you had Michale Melton, I had someone come to me who had not been to rehearsal in like two times, came to me and said, "Why are all these white people in the choir? They in the choir just because the choirs recording."

I said, "OK, so why are you in the choir?" I think a problem that we have as individuals is that we are so worried about the next person's motives that we lose sight of our reasons. "Even though we have all these white people in the choir, can you still do what you got in the choir to do? Are they preventing you from doing whatever?" And if the answer is "No" then my thing is "Hey, keep trucking."¹

¹Interview with Lloyd Holmes, 5/16/98.

In an interview I conducted with Ethel Young Minor I was surprised when she explained the way my presence in the choir had challenged her perception and understanding of the Gospel and race:

I think one thing I have shared with you before is that after watching you in particular being involved in the choir I had my first dream with white people in it. Did I tell you that? I never dreamed about white people until after that.

For me to see the gospel in the mouths of white people, you know I am very well aware of Christianity not being confined to a particular race. It is still something different when you are confronted with it in the *room* with your own expression. So for me as a black person I think it humanizes the experience of whites. I think we have a tendency to dehumanise the other, regardless of the position that we are in. In order for you to cope with your inability to survive or achieve as a black person then it becomes the objective white man. But when the white man comes in and sings the gospel with me then he can no longer be the objective white man, he becomes a human that I have to deal with, and I have to understand more critically the difference between a system and a person. So as a black person it really does challenge my thought process.²

As the weeks unfolded in the spring semester it became increasingly clear that things were going seriously wrong with the project. My efforts to have a functioning CD committee were failing. After three attempts to gather the members I was at a loss to know what to do. The sharing of the work was crucial in my strategy for two reasons. Firstly, I could avoid the accusations connected to race as already outlined. Secondly, I hoped to train a group of choir members so that the choir would be capable of repeating a similar project in my absence. The solution I came to was to form a number of partnerships with individuals around certain key tasks. I worked closely with the treasurer, LaRhonda Thompson, on the budget, the business manager, Lester Green, on the program. I worked with the president Tiffani Norman in coordinating the choir rehearsals. It was unsatisfactory, but the best I could do.

Far more serious were delays in preparing the choir to record. After weeks went by when the musical directors did not teach us the material for the album, choir members expressed a great deal of concern. Yet again I had to compromise my original position

² Interview with Ethel Young Minor 2/11/99

and intervene in hopes of the project remaining in schedule. With nine weeks to go and still no new songs learned, I presented Briggs and Collins with a blank calendar with the rehearsal dates written in. I asked them to return it to me with the rehearsal schedule completed. On seeing on paper the little time they had left, Briggs and Collins panicked. Briggs became hyper-active and hysterical in his dealings with the choir. Collins, on the other hand, almost completely abdicated his responsibilities absenting himself from many of the final rehearsals. Briggs' frantic efforts realized a stunning coup, which those with a religious inclination (a fair proportion of a gospel choir!) saw as divine intervention. One of the songwriters approached by Briggs, Jason Clark, not only offered a song, but also the use of his band for the recording. Clark was a musician in the, now late, O'Landa Draper and the Associates. The band had played on Draper's latest Grammy nominated project and in 1999 were the musicians on a Grammy winning recording.

There were a few noises of dissent within the choir, most notably from Collins; however the choir had little choice but to accept the lifeline that was being thrown. The music that would now be recorded would be far from a documentary recording of UMGC, which from a field work perspective is unfortunate. It would now be a product that could generate considerable interest in the gospel world, that could conceivably sell on a national scale. Jason Clark's coming on board as musical producer meant that the spotlight was off me as the driving force behind the project. The initial approach to Clark, his offer, and the choir's acceptance were none of my doing. His domination of the project in the minds' of the choir eclipsed my role. On the night before the concert, after the final rehearsal, Clark asked me to say a few words to the choir as the producer. The majority of the choir had not perceived me in this role until this point. I was aware that my cover as "just another choir member" had been blown.

For my research into the choir, the issue of whether I am an insider or an outsider is always pertinent. In my role as advocate and fieldworker I am taking on a position as outsider. My nationality and ethnicity also set me apart as an outsider. The short piece I

wrote for the fall 1998 program on the history of the choir had the following as part of the conclusion;

In their struggle for excellence and recognition, the choir has represented the University to thousands of people over the years. Now with the advent of the release of their first album, the choir is poised to represent the University to more people than ever before.

When I wrote this in the third, rather than the first person, I was aware that, even being a member of the choir did not mean I could be so presumptuous as to claim that I had had any part in a struggle for recognition. Ethel Young Minor proof read the program and asked me why I had excluded myself in this way. I explained my reasons and she was adamant that it was "our struggle," and so the text was changed. This does not change my understanding of being a guest in someone else's culture. Maybe after a year and a half in this group I am considered a good guest, comfortable enough with the ways of the household, so that most of the time I am treated as one of the family.

The struggle to produce this CD continues. The latest round of problems was connected with the contracts between Malaco and two of the songwriters, William Graves and Delbert Collins. Yet again I found myself walking a tight rope created by race. These songwriters refused to allow Malaco to publish their songs, wishing to maintain their own publishing rights. The songwriters perception is that they were being swindled out of money. I was placed in a position of trying to coerce these songwriters into signing these contracts in order for the project to proceed. The parallels with white record company executives having black musicians sign away their rights is uncomfortable. My attempts to hold process in equal place to product is a constant tension. The choir is recording four new songs in the Malaco studio in Jackson, a full year after the first recordings were made. Hopefully the album will be released in the fall of 1999.

For any field worker the question of how he or she is changing the nature of what they are recording is one that needs addressing. In the case of UMGC I have clearly

influenced the subject of research by enabling the choir to record an album. The field worker as advocate for the researched is not a new concept. John and Alan Lomax, for example, who made field recordings of unknown musicians for their research and then, as in the case of Ledbelly, brought them to national attention.

Two factors are worth considering in asking whether by organizing the recording I compromised my research into the choir. I was primarily a member of the choir, my documentary role developed after joining, and paralleled my pursuit of the recording project. I would be a member of the choir even if I was not documenting its activities.

The second factor is that despite changing the course of events, I was not changing the tradition of music or spirituality for the choir. I played no part in suggesting what style of music would be recorded, nor did I pick the songs. The musical tradition of contemporary gospel is bound up with commercial recordings. In the semester preceding the recording, with only a couple of exceptions, all the songs performed by the choir were learned from recordings of commercial artists. So despite all the extra work that the recording demanded of the choir, there was continuity of tradition.

My hope is that the changes this CD will make in the perceptions of the University of Mississippi, both within and without the institution, will bring about a change in the actual environment of this campus. I hope that the University of Mississippi Gospel Choir will continue to be a prophetic force for integration at an institution in a state which still has a long way to go before African American people and culture are truly valued. In the future I hope it will not be so surprising for the administration to find a group of African American students organizing themselves successfully, celebrating their own culture and promoting the University as a place of diversity.

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&
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Valerie Harmon	1/27/99
Lloyd Holmes	5/16/98, & 1/20/99
Jerry Jordan	1/29/99
Mark Kidd	2/2/99
Gloria Kellum	2/9/99
Monica Lester	11/21/97
Bonita Terry Malone	2/2/99
Michale Melton	2/9/99
Ethel Young Minor	10/31/97, & 2/11/99
Morales Mobley	2/23/99
Tiffany Norman	11/22/97
Chalis Pomeroy	1/27/99
Thomas "Sparky" Reardon	2/11/99
Elridge Rose	3/20/98
Otis Sanford	4/21/98
Gwen Smith	11/21/97
Linda Redmond Sanford Taylor,	2/11/98, & 4/21/98
Dee Thomas	1/16/99
Cheryl Weakley Turner	4/22/98
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APPENDIX

APPENDIX

Introduction by Ethel Young Minor to the program for the live recording, April 8, 1998.

Dear Friends and Supporters of The University of Mississippi Gospel Choir,

It is a great pleasure to present the sounds of the University of Mississippi Gospel Choir on such an auspicious occasion. The choir members understood the historical significance of recording a CD from this project's outset; however, the connection between the recording and the progress of race relations in Mississippi was crystalized for many at a pre-recording concert during the Black Alumni Reunion.

As we gave the closing remarks of the concert and prepared for the benediction, we acknowledged the presence of James Meredith, the first African American student to enroll at the University of Mississippi. When praying the final prayer, I found it difficult to contain the joy in Christ that I felt. While the choir sang in the background, I thought of the multitude of events that Blacks in Mississippi could look upon as evidence that God always keeps his promises. I thought of the countless generations before us who sang, "Over my head, I hear music in the air. There must be a God, somewhere." Because I heard music over my head from some of the most talented students in the nation, I knew that we were living testimonies that, "there must be a God, somewhere." Our very presence gave credence to our beliefs that God's promises do not always come in the time, shape, or package that we expect, but they do come, pressed down, shaken together, and running over." Backstage, after the concert ended, I kneeled to praise God for the quality Black students, administrators, staff and faculty members who are now inextricably mixed into the fabric of this campus.

One of the songs written for the recording reminds listeners of Christ's invitation and his promise to "make your life brand new." This recording shows us that not only does Christ make individual lives "brand new" but that he also makes the environment we live in "brand new" through miraculous and tremendous change. Our environment in Oxford, Mississippi, has experienced miraculous and tremendous change since segregationists spat on James Meredith to remind him that he brought an unwelcome presence. Our environment has experienced miraculous and tremendous change since the burning of the Phi Beta Sigma house in the 1980's. And our environment has experienced miraculous and tremendous change since the choir's advisor, Lloyd Holmes, joined the choir in 1990 and found it difficult to attain university support for the choir's endeavors.

We present to you a new generation of students who are the epitome of what The University of Mississippi represents as we enter the 21st century. These students do not whistle "Dixie" or wave the rebel flag. Instead, they sing praises to God from their hearts

and wave the flag of peace to integrated audiences throughout the state of Mississippi and beyond.

The recording of this CD could not have taken place without "brand new" changes on all levels of the University. People of many races, different genders, and various spiritual beliefs supported this project. Peter Slade, a choir member who spearheaded the project, is a white male from England. Other non-Blacks sing with the choir and have joined the struggle to eradicate hate from Mississippi's landscape. We have received support from the Chancellor's office, the Sesquicentennial Committee, The Alumni Association, the residence halls and many local businesses. Also churches with membership that represent different denominations and races have come together to financially and spiritually support this project. We appreciate and thank all who have supported our endeavors.

Sincerely,

Rev. Dr. Ethel A. Young-Minor

Choir Advisor