



"Doe & Dove" - The Doris Akers Singers Story

by Opal Louis Nations

Nobody talks much about Doris Akers, or even gives her credit for her considerable part in shaping Post-War gospel music composition. Doris Mae Akers, or "Doe" as she is affectionately remembered by her family, was the author of over 500 gospel songs. Akers took her place in Nashville's Gospel Music Hall of Fame at the Ryman on November 27, 2001. Her lack of recognition in the world is probably due to two factors. First of all, "Doe" never sung her own praises, preferring to make light of her work. Second, "Doe" was never fully accepted by the greater body of the black church. The fact that she looked Caucasian (she was a stunning, curly-headed blonde as a child) and later would form a choral unit of mixed race – The Sky Pilot Choir – did not seem to help matters.

When the Sky Pilot Choir's Christian Faith album won Best Gospel Vocal Album in the trades in 1959, she became closely affiliated with the white-owned Manna Music Company who was able to distribute her work widely. Although she was noted for being one of the first musicians to bridge the gap between black and white gospel,

there were those who thought that "Doe" was steering black choral music along a path that lead away from its African American roots.

"Doe" was born May 21, 1923 in Brookfield, Missouri, situated off Country Route 36, about mid-way between St. Joseph to the west and Hannibal to the east. Both parents, Floyd and Pearl Akers, possessed musical talent. Floyd was blessed with a beautiful tenor voice and Pearl played both bass vial and pianica (a reeded mouth piano). Pearl had taught herself to play both instruments and was proficient. Much of this talent rubbed off on "Doe." "Doe" had a clan of nine siblings -- Edward and Floyd who both had strong tenor voices, Evelyn who sadly passed at twenty-three years of age, Marian, Donald, Nellie, Bernice, Harley and Charles. Charles also passed at a young age. Nellie was "Doe's" play-companion and Bernice, an outstanding musical talent, cultivated a beautiful soprano voice.

In 1927 Pearl and the children moved to Kirksville, Missouri, the largest town, thirty miles northeast of Brookfield. The children's stepfather, John Lawson, was a good pianist. His musical range stretched from classical to gospel and honky-tonk. "Doe" took notice of Lawson's playing and picked up a few pointers just by listening and watching the placement of the notes. A family member tells that "Doe" could pick up an instrument and play it from memory. Brother Donald had acquired a trumpet and was taking lessons. During Donald's practice at home "Doe" took the trumpet and tried to figure out how the notes were made. It looked difficult. After retiring to bed, "Doe" dreamed she could play Bud Green's 1937 nugget "Once in a while."

After the dream she leapt out of bed, picked up the trumpet and played the tune. The family was mesmerized. Her knack of playing and composing music without lesson or instruction was a true gift. "Doe" just took all this for granted. The Akers talent even filtered down to others --nieces and nephews and kin who had formed the McClellan-Akers Singers who were said to have recorded for Savoy Records.

In Kirksville, "Doe" attended Lincoln High but chose not to focus on music. In 1928, "Doe" wrote her first gospel song, "Keep the fire burning in me." By 1930, with her step-father's help, she had mastered a few piano chords. During the 1930s "Doe" formed a family group with Marion, Edward and Donald. The quartet went out into Adair and Macon counties as Dot & The Swingsters. The little band played the music of Cab Calloway, Fletcher Henderson and Duke Ellington (Duke & "Doe" met up years later and even recorded together.) Duke was much impressed with "Doe's" ability to pick up any instrument and play it.

In 1945 "Doe" moved to Los Angeles. This was just at the time the L.A. gospel renaissance was taking shape. "Doe" could not have picked a better time. Arthur Atlas Peters had just put together the groundbreaking Voices of Victory Choir at Victory Baptist, Earl Amos Pleasant formed the influential Mount Moriah Baptist, and Eugene Douglas Smallwood would soon take charge at the Opportunity Baptist Church. Smallwood was a noted singer and composer of gospel songs for the 150-voice Evangelical Chorus. His self-published song sheets sold for fifteen cents and were sent out from L.A. to churches all over the country. Songs like "Whither shall I go, if I go" had a tremendous impact on "Doe" who was by now writing gospel songs of her own.

The Opportunity Baptist on East Twenty-Third Street had the reputable Thurston Gilbert Frazier as its minister of music. Both "Doe" and Frazier became mutual admirers and it was not long before "Doe" was serving as music director for the choir. In 1946 Rev. John Branham was made pastor at St. Paul's Baptist Church. Branham brought from Chicago a host of young innovative gospel singers and

composers. These included Prof. James Earle Hines who conducted the choir and formed his own Good Will Singers, concert pianist and composer Gwendolyn Cooper-Lightner, the Sallie Martin Singers and Cora Martin.

On occasion when Cooper-Lightner had been called away to take care of other duties, "Doe" was brought in to both sing and play piano for the Sallie Martin Singers. At around this point both Dorothy "Dove" Simmons and Hattie Hawkins were serving time in the Sallie Martin Singers.

By 1947 "Doe" had written a substantial number of gospel songs (drawn mainly from the message content of popular sermons) and thought it time to build her own gospel group to promote them. Taking both "Dove" and Hawkins out of the Sallie Martin Singers, "Doe" created The Simmons-Akers Trio. Dorothy or "Dove" Vernell Simmons possessed a peerless, operatic soprano voice, a voice that impressed its listeners with wonder. "Dove" also had ties to the Martin & Morris publishing company in Chicago, a very helpful connection. Dressed in lacy dresses and long, sensible skirts, the Simmons-Akers Trio traveled the national circuit on concert tours.

In no time at all the Trio was signed with Ed and Leo Mesner's Aladdin record label and set to record for their Score subsidiary. The first session took place on May 2, 1950. Four songs were recorded, two of which were "Doe" compositions. "I want a double portion of God's love," a song "Doe" had published at Martin & Morris in 1947, and "It means a lot to know Jesus for yourself," a composition dedicated to Prof. J. Earle Hines and published in early 1951 at her Simmons & Akers Music Room Company in L.A. The Music Room Company later sold phonograph records as well.

During the Trio days, "Dove" sang lead, Hattie harmony and "Doe" accompanied on piano. Not really divorced from an interest in rhythm & blues at the time, "Doe" composed a tune she gave to Joe Liggins. The song was called "Pink champagne." "Doe" insisted on not having her name on the copyright as she did not want to be associated with "the devil's music" for fear of losing her standing with members of the church. This was a decision that might have irked her later on as "Pink champagne" became an enormous hit for Liggins on Specialty Records when it hit the number one spot on Billboard's R&B, Juke Box and Best Seller charts in May 1950. Liggins took full composer's credit.

In all likelihood, J.W. Alexander, manager and tenor with the Pilgrim Travelers, brought "Doe" and the trio to Art Rupe's Specialty Records to audition. "Alex" served as unofficial talent scout for Rupe at this time. We know that the group recorded an album's worth of songs at Universal Records in Hollywood on February 8, 1951. "Alex" was a big fan of "Doe's" work, and the Travelers often performed and even recorded some of her charts. Only three songs off the demo tape were ever released – in 1994 when Lee Hildebrand and I compiled our Women of Gospel's Golden Age, Vol. 1 collection for Fantasy Records in Berkeley.

Strangely enough, all three songs – "Tell Jesus all," "Going to Canaan's shore" and "Glory to His name" – are either P.D. or written by others. "Tell Jesus all" is a Ward Singers-type vehicle with staccato overtones. "Going to Canaan's shore" is a mid-tempo exclamatory chart too short in length to really be of any effect. "Glory to His name" is a bright, up-tempo, praise-giving effort. Being only short recordings for demonstration, it is difficult to hear how well the trio could effectively capture a song when given time to "stretch out."

In January 1954 "Doe's" group recorded briefly for the Mesner Bros.' parent label, Imperial, and waxed "Meet me in Glory Land" coupled with "Doe's" "Lead me, guide me." "Lead me, guide me" became an enormous hit for Brother Joe May in 1954

and an even bigger seller for Elvis Presley when he gave it his moody best with the Jordanaires in 1972. ("Doe" and Elvis became extremely close friends.) This same year, the Simmons-Akers Gospel Singers Trio cut at least six known recordings for the Los Angeles-based Super label. I suspect Super was little more than a transcription service. At any rate, "Doe" used the discery to promote her musical and compositional abilities.

In 1954 "Doe" wrote "He delivered me." The song was culled for her first Super release and dedicated to her brother, Rev. Harley Akers, a pastor in Colorado Springs (more on him later.) The reverse, penned in 1948, "Jesus is the name," was dedicated to her old friend and colleague, pianist / accompanist Gwendolyn Cooper-Lightner who "Doe" met when playing with the Sallie Martin Singers. "Doe" wrote "I was there when the spirit came" for her second Super outing and paired it with Fanny Crosby's "Pass me not." "Doe" used the same set-up for her third Super release, pitching her 1954 song "God spoke to me one day" (dedicated to Dorothy's mother) with Mahalia Jackson's fondly remembered "Do you know Him." Both "Doe" and Gwendolyn Cooper-Lightner wrote "He's alright with me," a rocking piece of righteousness, coupled with "Doe's" "I never knew joy before," a rousing opus best recalled by the Pilgrim Travelers' cover version.

"Doe's" fifth Super release aroused more notice than any gone before. Her beautifully sublime "Grow closer," augmented with perfect organ accompaniment, opened the ears of many. "Dove's" upper register ornamentation took the song to a special place. Brother Joe May and the Pilgrim Travelers covered it with great success for Specialty Records. The reverse was "Doe's" "Look to the hills," arranged by Don Lee White and dedicated to Rev. A.A. Peters and the Voices of Victory Choir. This infectious song was lauded as one of her most significant charts. Many artists recorded it but not as convincingly as the Simmons-Akers' original rendering.

"Doe's" final Super release was "God is so good," the blissful ballad for which she will always be remembered. This lilting, infectious ballad was recorded a number of times by "Doe" during her long career, and fans of her music never failed to ask her to sing it whenever she gave live performances. The Super version was multi-tracked with her own voice. The later, 1962 Victor reissue finds "Doe" supported by a choral group. Mahalia Jackson's cover version, recorded two years later, had both bass and drum added and does not hold up to the original.

The beginning members in the Simmons-Akers Gospel Singers included not only "Doe," "Dove" and Hattie but "Doe's" sister Bernice Tillman and sometimes Louise Byrd. During the late 1950s Ruth Black-Castille traveled with the Simmons-Akers Gospel Singers who were almost always a quartet when they went on the road, with the three founding members forming the core of the group. The quartet sang many of "Doe's" songs, including "Life eternal," "I want to go deeper in the Lord," and "He's a light unto my pathway." Wherever the group traveled, they stayed at friends or members of the church where they were engaged to perform. "Doe" always took the church offerings. She would often say you can't beat God's giving when it came time to pass the plate.

One day Ruth suggested to "Doe" that she compose a song along the same charitable lines. It was not long before "Doe" came up with the song "You can't beat God's giving." Strangely, the tune ended up in the movie "Guyana Tragedy."

In 1956 "Doe" and "Dove" (with "Doe" on lead) cut one single for the tiny Songs of the Cross label. The charts included the lilting "I found something" with Prof. Alex Bradford on organ and chimes. "He's every where" pitched as the A-side was arranged

by Maxine Blackburn, and again dedicated to “Dove’s” mother, a devout singing evangelist.

January 1957 was a major marker in “Doe’s” career. That was when she signed with RCA Victor Records and gained the advantage of having her work heard not only in the U.S. but in foreign lands. She wrote and recorded “The smile on His face never fades,” a song chosen for “Doe’s” impending album release in the spring of that same year. By now the “studio” group had been enlarged to include “Doe,” “Dove,” Virgil G. Sanchez, Ethelene Gent, Richard Whitfield, Helen Marie Henderson, Cora Martin and Carroll Du Bois Tolbert. Some of these soldiers were, of course, taken from the Sallie Martin Singers who, as part of the singing talent at St. Paul church, were themselves enjoying a measure of success on Capitol Records.

RCA Victor issued “Doe’s” group’s first album, “Sing Praises Unto the Lord,” during the spring of 1957. Eleven of the songs were written and / or arranged by “Doe.” The remaining chart was “Teach me Lord to wait.” Interestingly, the song “Trouble” was recorded at this session but for some unfathomable reason it was not issued, despite the song being one of “Doe’s” most memorable efforts. “Trouble” was included and performed by Linda Hopkins in her Broadway production of “Bessie & Me.”

A number of important events came about in 1958. First, “Doe” became choir director for the Sky Pilot Radio Church in Los Angeles under the pastorship of Dr. Aubrey C. Lee, affectionately labeled “The Sky Pilot” for his work in radio programming, namely at KGER where the choir broadcast three times a week. The choir also appeared on television. “Doe” was responsible for making the choir reflect the various ethnic groups that lived in the neighborhood. Second, she teamed up with white gospel songwriter Tim Spencer with whom, among others, she rearranged “Climbin’ Jacob’s ladder,” a song recorded by a host of black and white church singers, including the Chuck Wagon Gang. Third, “Doe” collaborated on a song with Mahalia Jackson entitled “Lord, don’t move that mountain,” reported to have sold in the hundreds of thousands.

The original Simmons-Akers Trio Singers were gone and in their place was a group of seasoned professionals, not necessarily formed as an ongoing entity but one which could be put together at a moment’s notice. “Doe”, who had split away from “Dove,” was now going out as a solo entity, whereas before, due to a lack of confidence in her own vocal abilities, “Doe” had let “Dove” take care of most of the lead singing. Soon, “Doe” became known as “Miss Gospel Music” and “the writer of tomorrow’s music today.” Not only were her songs sung by others but published widely in hymnals and songbooks.

In 1959 she put out her first Christian Faith album with the Sky Pilot Choir, then composed of eighty-three singers. Her customary singing trio, once the Simmons-Akers Singers, was now replaced by the all-white Sutton Sisters. Erie Gladney, one-time member of Earl Hines’ Goodwill Singers, would often solo with the choir. Many of “Doe’s” beautifully melodic gospel ballads were recalled, like “God is so good to me,” “Grow closer,” and “To me it’s so wonderful.” “Doe” was voted best gospel music composer by the publishing industry, an award she won the following year after the release of “Doris Akers Sings,” also on Christian Faith. This time, “Doe” moved into the chorus and orchestra mode with Ralph Carmichael conducting and Tim Spencer sharing some of the lyric writing and arranging.

“Doe” continued to record for RCA Victor during the early 1960s, after cutting four songs for Readers’ Digest. The second album, “Sing for You,” was put together in

partnership with Howie Lister and the Statesman Quartet. The third, "Highway to Heaven," featured the Jack Halloran Singers with the young Billy Preston on organ. By this time "Doe" had moved entirely into the white Christian community and was seeking a more worldly audience. When "Doe" left the Sky Pilot Radio Church she went to direct her stepbrother Rev. Harley Akers' choir at The People's Tabernacle of Faith. Rev. Harley Akers was formerly a member of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Colorado Springs.

In 1962, "Doe" wrote "Sweet sweet spirit," her most widely acclaimed composition, for which she won five gospel awards. "Sweet sweet spirit" became Elvis Presley' most beloved gospel song, according to "Doe's" family.

In 1970, "Doe" moved to Columbus, Ohio, then relocated to Minneapolis during the 1990s. She died at age seventy-two in 1995. A virtual Who's Who in gospel music turned out for her induction ceremony at the Ryman in November 2001. Bobby Jones, Tremaine Hawkins and Albertina Walker paid her tribute. To "Doe," songwriting, says Nellie Bright, her sister, was like just an everyday chore. She just sat and wrote it all down. If "Doe" was just a singer, she probably would have lost her black audience completely. It was the songwriting that kept the bridge between black and white in place.

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with help from Barbara Elam
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