

Thomas A. Dorsey Father of Modern Gospel

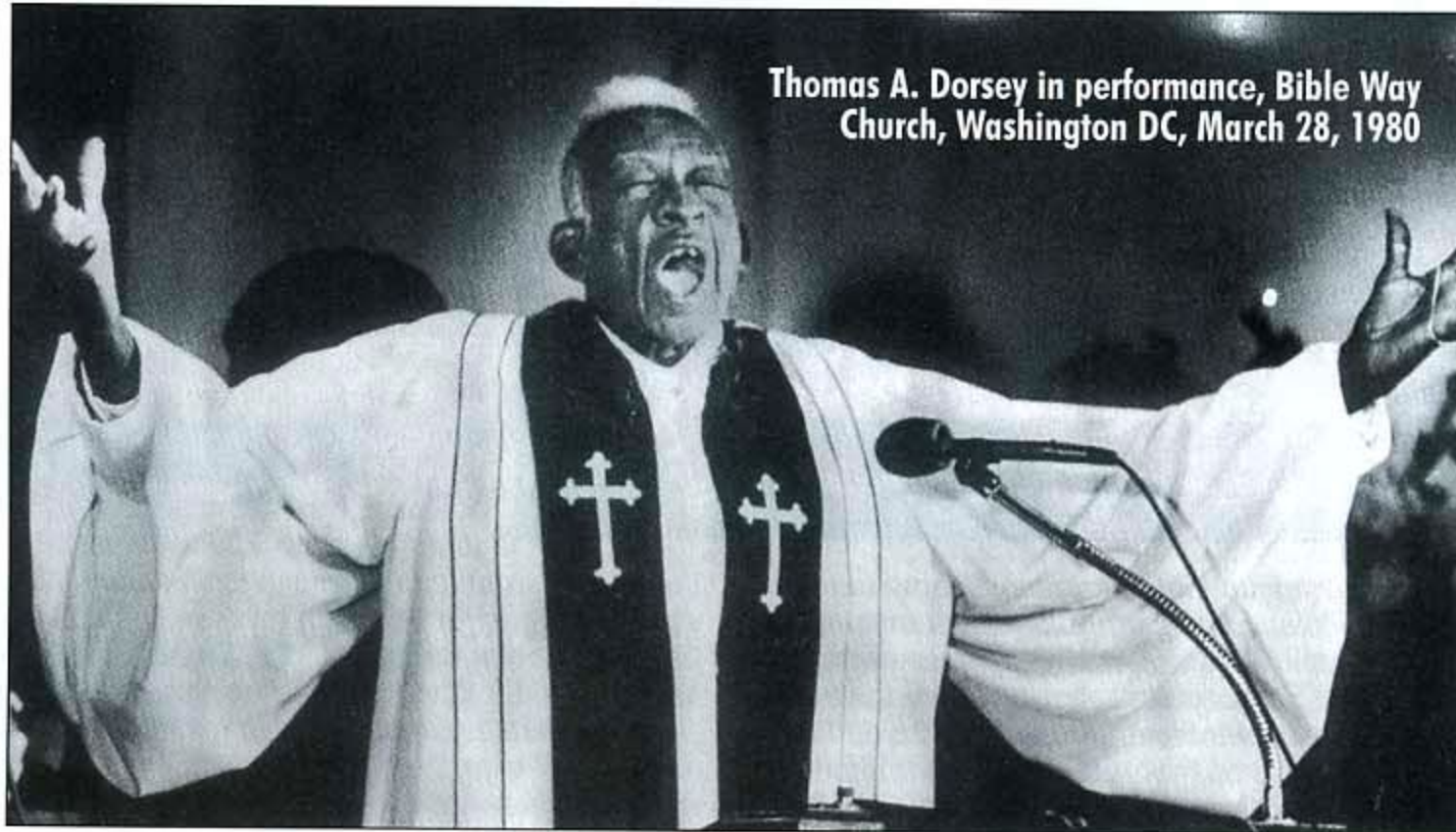
BY OPAL LOUIS NATIONS

The late Thomas A. Dorsey is today considered the first African-American church-music composer to add soul, blues and good old joyful singing to “gospel music,” a phrase first coined by Englishman Rev. Arthur A. Rees of Sunderland in 1873. Dorsey is also credited as the father of the black gospel music concert (his sponsorship dated back to 1936) and organized one of the first traveling gospel singing aggregations, Dorsey’s Female Gospel Quartette, to tout his compositions which were inspired by Ira D. Sankey, Dr. Isaac Watts, Homer Rodeheaver and Rev. Dr. Chas. A. Tindley of Philadelphia, among others. The content of his songs often dwelt on the blessings and sorrows of man as well as the joys of the after-life. He lowered the third and sixth degrees of the musical scale, wrote in “open” and “closed” positions, threw in “call and response” techniques and set his texts to every tempo he could find.

He was born Thomas Andrew Dorsey on July 1, 1899 in the former gold-mining town of Villa Rica, Georgia, 38 miles east of Atlanta. His mother pianist Etta Plant’s brother-in-law, Corrie M. Hindsman, first introduced shape-note singing to the Mt. Prospect Baptist Church, which was founded by J.M. Hindsman, Corrie’s father, in 1887. Thomas’s father, Thomas Madison Dorsey, was pastor at Mt. Prospect. After an unsuccessful temporary move to Atlanta (Rev. Dorsey failed to make an adequate living for his family as a preacher), they moved back to Villa Rica to a house near the railroad tracks, within walking distance from the Villa Rica Middle School which the younger Thomas attended. Etta Plant purchased a pump organ, from which keyboard “sprang” (to use Dorsey’s own words) Thomas’s musical career.

Young Thomas, the oldest of three siblings, played at preaching under the porch in imitation of his father. Rev. Dorsey, a stern man averse to the music of the streets, sometimes took his son along to accompany him at various church engagements. In 1908 the Dorseys again relocated to Atlanta where the young, impressionable Thomas heard blues singers in vaudeville theatres and learned blues piano in the red light district.

When he was eleven, Thomas got himself a job selling nickel soda pop at the 81 Theatre, a black vaudeville emporium on Atlanta’s Decatur Street. Many of the great attractions of the day appeared at the 81. Early influences were Ed Butler, house organist, and Eddie Heywood Sr. In 1911 Dorsey met Ma and Pa Rainey, who traveled mostly with a circus. He also got acquainted with Butterbeans & Susie, a singing comedy act, and the great Bessie Smith—with whom he toured as accompanist a little later on. By now Dorsey’s parents had learned to tolerate young Thomas’s worldly associations. His home schooling piano



Thomas A. Dorsey in performance, Bible Way Church, Washington DC, March 28, 1980

teacher, a Mrs. Graves, administered music lessons four times a week. Dorsey became such a proficient pianist that he was awarded honorary degrees by several local schools. All this led up to his earning the sobriquet “Professor Dorsey.”

After a brief stint playing house parties around the Atlanta area, he struck out on his own. Moving north to Gary, Indiana, he worked in a steel mill. Extra money came from playing in small ensembles with Fred Pollack and the Will Walker Syncopators. He was then hired on by J. Mayo Williams of Paramount Records in Chicago to prepare lead sheets for recording material. He started writing charts, the first being some minor embellishments to “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” initially introduced to the commercial public by Alberta Hunter in 1917. But full copyright went to Eddie Green. (“A Good Man Is Hard to Find” has since been rearranged and adapted by many blues singers to suit their needs.)

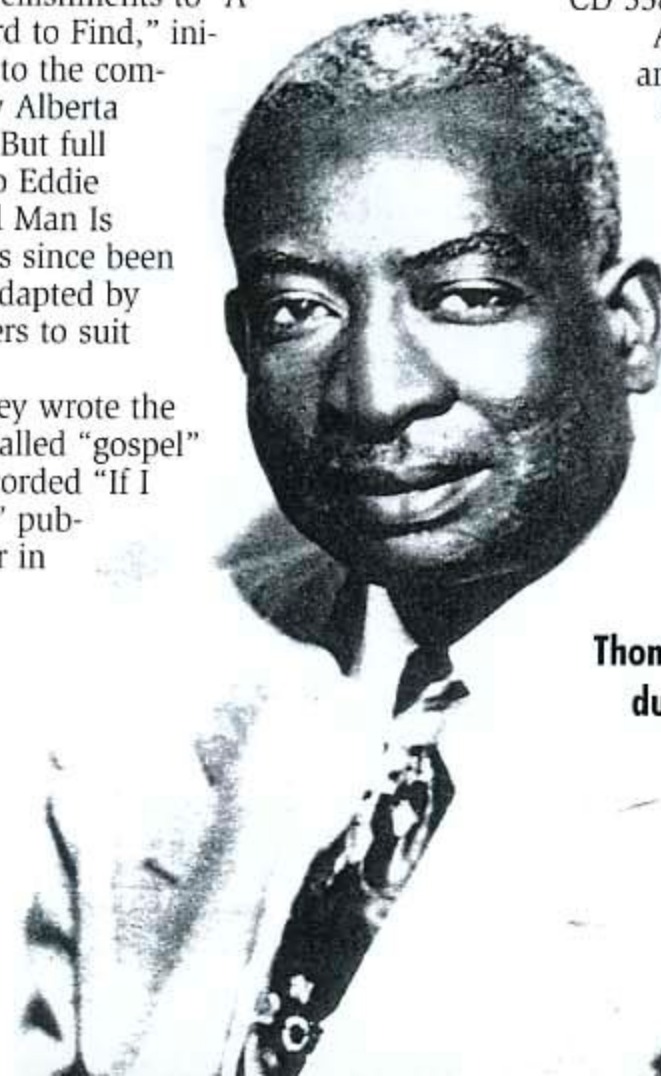
In 1920, Dorsey wrote the first of what he called “gospel” songs—the unrecorded “If I Don’t Get There,” published a year later in *Gospel Pearls*, a publication of The National Baptist Convention. In 1924 Dorsey copyrighted his gospel

tune “We Will Meet Him in the Sweet By and By.” He also submitted work to Ma Rainey and Trixie Smith. Between 1923 and 1932 he wrote and arranged 200 blues songs for vaudeville stars. He continued writing blues and copyrighted “If You Don’t Believe I’m Leaving, You Can Count the Days I’m Gone,” recorded by Sonny Boy Nelson and others.

Just when Dorsey organized his own group, the Whispering Syncopators (which later included the young Lionel Hampton), in 1925, Ma Rainey recorded two Dorsey compositions: “Broken Hearted Blues” (1925) and “Broken Soul Blues” (1926). [Both are currently available on Document CD 5583.]

After touring as pianist with Ma Rainey and her five-member Wild Cats Jazz Band and Bertha “Chippie” Hill, Dorsey hooked up with Florida-raised bluesman Hudson Whittaker. The pair became known as Georgia Tom and Tampa Red. In 1928 Red asked Dorsey to write a new arrangement for an old off-color song called “Tight Like That.” [Available on Document CD 5073, “Tight Like That” has been used through the years as a model for many off-color blues odes.]

“Tight Like That” sold so well that folks lined up for blocks around their local record stores. The song was played and copied everywhere. Tampa Red benefitted the most. He had



Thomas A. Dorsey during the '40s

Photo courtesy of Opal Louis Nations

17 new Vocalion releases issued in 1929 alone. Then Dorsey began to perform solo as Barrelhouse Tom. Being in and around Chicago in the old Grand Ballroom days one could catch jazz immortals like Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake. Dorsey certainly struck up a friendship with both. He also stayed in contact with his church friends and attended the activities of the all-black National Baptist Convention.

"Being the Depression, when times is hard," said Dorsey, "a fella thinks deeper. My strong early religious influences and the need to make some point in my life led me back to the church." Dorsey joined the Pilgrim Baptist Church (much to incumbent choir director Edward H. Boatner's disgust) and continued to write more gospel songs like "If You See My Savior" and "How About You" for the chorus. Dorsey recorded "If You See My Savior" himself in 1932. [Document CD 6022] "How About You," not published until 1941, was first recorded by Blind Willie McTell from Atlanta on Regal Records in 1950.

Dorsey suffered through a series of illnesses during these formative years, but nothing matched the double tragedy that befell him on August 26 and 27, 1932. Dorsey and songwriter E.C. Davis were on their way from Chicago to St. Louis to attend a revival meeting. Thirty miles from home, Dorsey discovered that he had left his briefcase containing all his music at home. Returning and finding his wife Nettie Harper Dorsey (who was close to giving birth to their child) in bed asleep, he thought it best not to disturb her, but Davis, having had a terrible premonition, decided on the spot not to attend the revival. He somehow sensed that something was wrong. Dorsey shrugged off his friend's concern and took to the road.

The next night at the revival meeting Dorsey received a telegram. The message stated that his newborn son, Thomas Andrew Dorsey Jr., was doing fine but that his wife had passed during childbirth. Rev. Jesse Adams drove the devastated Dorsey home. When he arrived, the doctors would not let Dorsey see his wife, only his son. But by some unforeseen twist of fate, Thomas Andrew Dorsey Jr. died the next day.

"There ain't no sense in me trying to write songs of hope anymore. I ought to go back into the blues business," thought Dorsey. One night, not long after Nettie's funeral, Dorsey headed over to Prof. Theodore Frye's music room, a place where Dorsey often rehearsed and put together his songs. Fooling around on the keys a melody, as if by magic, came to him. Stumbling for words and in a mood of dejection and despair, Dorsey came up with the lyric which ran "Precious Lord, take my hand. Lead me on. Let me stand. I am tired. I am weak. I am worn. Through the storm, through the night, lead me on to the light. Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me on."

The first popular version of the song was recorded by the Heavenly Gospel Singers on the BlueBird label in February 1937. It is the rendering of the late Marion Williams with Dorsey at the piano, tenderly recalling his wife's fate, that is best remembered today (recorded for Columbia in 1973 — LP 32151).

A week after Dorsey set "Precious Lord" to music in the Fall of 1932 he gave it its debut at the Pilgrim Baptist Church. Having published it immediately, Dorsey took to performing the tune all over the country. By this point Dorsey had set up his own music publishing and mail order business. He had produced a book of poetry and a

guide to piano duets. "Precious Lord" took off like a prairie fire. Dorsey himself sang it on his first trip out to the Holy Lands. Over the years, "Precious Lord" has been translated into thirty-two languages, Fannie Lou Hamer used it much like an anthem at her Mississippi Summer Voter Registration campaign, and Tennessee governor Frank Clement recited it as part of his keynote address at the Democratic National Convention of 1956. Mahalia Jackson sang it at Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s funeral in 1968. Many luminaries have cut waxings, including the Soul Stirrers, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, the Golden Gate Quartet and the Staple Singers.

In the early 1930s Dorsey and Frye organized the first recorded choir at the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Chicago. After Nettie's demise and the hiring of the young Sallie Martin to direct and play piano for the new choir, Dorsey went back on the road to promote his music, selling sheet music for a dime apiece. For demonstration purposes, he hired local Chicago singer Rebecca Tolbert, whom he accompanied on keyboards. He also went out with an all-female gospel quartet composed of Sallie Martin, Mattie Wilson, Dettie Gay and Bertha Armstrong. Sallie Martin organized, with Dorsey's help, the first black gospel music convention—The National Convention of Gospel Choirs and Choruses—which was chartered in 1939.

Although Dorsey first met Mahalia Jackson in 1929, he did not begin a significant writer/singer association with her until 1935. In 1937 he wrote "Peace In the Valley" for Jackson, but she did not record it commercially until much later on. Mahalia Jackson's first recording of a Dorsey song came about in 1946 at Apollo Records, where she waxed his 1944 composition "I'm Goin' to Wait Until My Change Shall Come."

In 1935, on a trip to Philadelphia, Dorsey was introduced to Mrs. Gertrude Ward. Gertrude and her two pre-teen daughters, Willa and Clara, harmonized as a trio called the Consecrated Gospel Singers. The Consecrated Gospel Singers sang hymns and light classics in churches and salons around Philadelphia. It was not long before the Wards closed out their concerts with a Dorsey song, or a "Dorsey"—as gospel songs were then labeled. By the late 1930s Dorsey songs were found in most major white hymnals published in the Deep South.

In 1938 Dorsey wrote "Thy Servant's Prayer" and in 1939 "Hide Me in Thy Bosom." The Paramount Gospel Singers of San Francisco were the first African American quartet to record Dorsey's "Peace In the Valley" (in August 1951 for Coral Records).

Dorsey continued to write gospel songs into the 1960s. Research is still under way to determine how many hundreds of songs he either composed or arranged. Dorsey died in Chicago on January 23, 1993. ♦

Opal Nations, born in Brighton, England, was lead vocalist with the Alexis Korner Band and later his own group, The Frays. He also sang with The Ram John Holder Group. With The Frays, and later as a soloist, he recorded for Decca Records in London. For 14 years, he hosted various shows at KPFA in Berkeley. He produced the Legendary Gospel Specialty reissue series for Fantasy Records and the Nashboro Gospel reissue series for AVI. He currently resides in Oakland, Cal. and writes articles and conducts gospel music research.