Percussive accompaniment within the black church experience dates back to the early part of the century. Both the Pentecostal and Holiness denominations required a measure of celebratory music to heighten their sometimes wildly ecstatic song services. First came the instruments commonly associated with minstrelsy, the banjo, harmonium and melodium, then gradually the piano became the favored instrument.

One of the earliest exponents was Blind Arizona Dranes (c.1905-c.1960), a female sanctified singer and first-known gospel-pianist. Dranes served as songleader and pianist for Bishops Emmett Morey Page (1871-1944), Riley Felman Williams (c.1880-1952) and Samuel M. Crouch Jr. (1896-1976). Dranes played in the ragtime tradition synonymous with the syncopated styles that flourished in the 1890s. Dranes recorded with Sarah Martin in Chicago for Okeh Records.

Then came Thomas Andrew Dorsey, known as “The Father of Gospel Music,” who took the straight forward blues refrain and together with his simple, spiritual propensity developed a style that became known as gospel piano. Dorsey, who had started out as arranger and band leader for the great Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, went on to write many jazz and blues compositions for Tampa Red (Hudson Whittaker) and for his own small ensemble, Texas Tommy & Friends. One of Dorsey’s earliest gospel compositions, “If I don’t get there,” was published in 1921 in “Gospel Pearls,” a songbook published by the newly formed National Baptist Convention.

Pearl Williams-Jones describes Roberta Martin as the spiritual and artistic embodiment of black gospel music. Although Dorsey is credited with being the originator of gospel piano, Martin made the largest contribution in terms of composition.
Martin was also a singer, arranger and organizer of groups and choirs who went on to found and operate what became the largest and most lucrative gospel music publishing house in Chicago. Inspired by Dorsey, Martin went on to compose a fat portfolio of classic gospel charts incorporating the country roots of the church experience.

Another important innovator was Athens, Georgia-born Rev. “Little” Lucy Smith, one of Roberta Martin’s protégés. Under Martin’s tutoring, Smith became a skilled master of both organ and piano. In the early 1960s, Smith became the official pianist for the Roberta Martin Singers.

We cannot talk about the history and development of gospel piano without discussing the work of the late Prof. Alex Bradford and Rev. James Cleveland. Prof. Alex Bradford (1927-1978) is considered one of the most prolific and certainly one of the most flamboyant singer-pianist-composers in gospel music. Born in Bessemer, Alabama and educated in New York, North Carolina and Florida, Bradford was inspired by Arizona Dranes, Memphis-born composer William Herbert Brewster and singer Queen Candice Anderson who recorded many of Brewster’s compositions.

In 1947 Bradford moved to Chicago where he became Mahalia Jackson’s secretary and traveling companion. In 1951 he formed the Bradford Singers and by 1953 had scored a nationwide hit with his composition “Too close to heaven.” Bradford’s dramatic, ornamental piano technique and husky baritone vocal stylings set the stage for similar, predominantly male, outfits like the Gospel Clefs and Raymond Rasberry Singers.

Rev. James Edward Cleveland (1931-1991) mastered every facet of Post-war gospel. Not only did he sing, play piano, compose and conduct choirs, a considerable portion of his life was spent helping others achieve some measure of visibility in the gospel world. Born in Chicago, Cleveland first sang as soloist in Dorsey’s Junior Gospel Choir at the Pilgrim Baptist Church. After wrecking his voice in the Thorne Crusaders, Cleveland went on to compose, sing and arrange for Albertina Walker and the Caravans, the Gospel All Stars, Meditations, Gospel Chimes and James Cleveland Singers, to name but a few. Cleveland wrote more than five hundred songs, some of which became gospel standards. In 1968 he organized The Gospel Music Workshop of America which still convenes yearly at major cities around the country. Cleveland did more to increase the gospel repertoire than play and invent any form of lasting innovation.

Other pianists of note include from the early developmental period Kenneth Morris, from the middle refining years Curtis Dublin, Jeff Banks and Mildred Falls, and from the late period Jessy Dixon and Doris Akers.

HERBERT “PEE WEE” PICKARD

Herbert “Pee Wee” Pickard (born 1933) is considered one of Detroit’s most esteemed keyboardists. Pickard served both as pianist and organist for Dorothy Love Coates and the Gospel Harmonettes of Birmingham, Alabama when Evelyn Starks Hardy, the original pianist, returned to public school teaching. Pickard is also a noted songwriter, director and arranger who began his musical career in Detroit at the age of four. In 1945 he appeared with the Dean Robert Nolan Choir alongside the headlining Lionel Hampton Band. His experience with the choir led him to decide on a future career in gospel music. During high school he played on the daily morning broadcast of Rev. W. Cornelius Barnes’ Church of Our Faith. On Sunday mornings he played on broadcasts with Chas Pennington and the United Gospel Singers. With time left over he sat in on piano for Rev. Ralph Boyd and Bishop Tefferoa.
Pickard holds two B.S. degrees from Wayne State University, one in Math Education, which led to a teaching job in Detroit’s public schools, and one in Mechanical Engineering which later helped steer him into finding an engineering job at the Ford Motor Company for a short while. On the music front he toured with the late Prof. Alex Bradford from Bessemer, Alabama and Bro. Joe May of East St. Louis. After serving two years in the U.S. Army as x-ray technician, Pickard joined forces with Coates and the Harmonettes, with whom he stayed as pianist and organist for most of the 1950s.

In 1959 Pickard joined Rev. James Cleveland and Rev. Chas Ashley Craig at Detroit Prayer Tabernacle Church. During the early 1960s he sat on the organ bench and directed the all-male choir, the Mighty Voices of Thunder, at the Greater New Moriah Baptist Church pastored by B.L. Hooks. Between this and serving as organist at Rev. C.L. Franklin’s New Bethel Radio Choir under the direction of Prof. Thomas H. Shelby, Pickard recorded with the late great Prof. Alfred Bolden for Atlantic Records.

Pickard has cut two albums for Savoy under his own name, one with his own aggregation, the Pickard Singers. He appears in the new Baptist Hymnal as having arranged “God never fails,” a song made widely popular by Rev. Clay Evans. He is composer of many gospel songs including “Give God a chance” and “He knows it all.” Pickard plays on the 1953 Gospel Harmonettes hit recording of “No hiding place,” a song used in Jerry Zucker's 1990 movie “Ghost.” Pickard’s piano style is full, bold and soulful, incorporating some of the blue colors used in secular music. He presently serves as music director at the New Light Baptist Church of Detroit pastored by Rev. Cornell Talley.

EVELYN STARKS HARDY

Pianist/arranger Evelyn Starks Hardy (born in 1922) is a native of Birmingham, Alabama where she attended Parker High, Miles College and the University of Alabama where she graduated with a masters degree in Guidance and Counseling. Her career took off in 1940 when she was called to play piano for the National Baptist Convention Choir in Birmingham. The National Baptist Convention dates back to the early 1920s. In 1921 the NBC put out “Gospel Pearls,” the first collection of gospel songs published by a black congregation using the term “gospel.” Many of Hardy’s friends sang in the choir. After the Convention ended, she and her friends decided to form a group to showcase the new gospel songs they had learned. It was proposed that Hardy serve as composer and arranger for these songs that her group of friends, composed of Mildred Madison Miller, second soprano, Odessa Glasgow Edwards, second alto, Vera Connor Kolb, first soprano, and Willie Mae Brooks Newberry, first alto, would sing. They called themselves the Gospel Harmoneers, then Lee Harmoneers, but switched to the Original Gospel Harmonettes when A & R people at RCA, suggested a name with a more feminine ring to it.

Within months the Harmonettes were asked by Alabama funeral director A.G. Gaston to air over WSGN. A regular weekly thirty minute radio broadcast was initiated, sponsored by Gaston Funeral Homes. The Harmonettes traveled East and West and became a leading touring act. In June 1949 they recorded for RCA, then in July 1951 they commenced waxing for Art Rupe’s Specialty label where they stayed for six years, making many successful recordings.

The awesome, sanctified Dorothy McGriff, a.k.a. Dorothy Love, took command as principal lead singer in 1950, after a Harmonettes trip to Nashville and a little persuasion. The Gospel Harmonettes were a joyful, frenzied group, given to much
shouting. Hardy and the Harmonettes appeared at Carnegie Hall with the late Mahalia Jackson, the Clara Ward Singers and Rev. James Cleveland.

Hardy performed off and on with the Gospel Harmonettes down through the years. She describes her piano style as being purely supportive, a modest statement from one able to go out successfully as a solo and play riveting, revivalist-type piano. She can be both blue and academic in her approach and enjoys playing with a passion. Hardy currently serves as pianist and arranger for a 124-member all male choir.

PROF. CHARLES TAYLOR

The Rev. Prof. Charles Taylor was born in Mobile, Alabama in 1929. Prof. Horace Clarence Boyer describes Taylor as a man who inherited all of Prof. Alex Bradford’s flamboyant moves and mannerisms. He was called to preach in 1951 and was licensed a year later. Moving to New York in the early 1950s, Taylor became affiliated with several Pentecostal church in the capacity of soloist, pianist and choir director. Absorbing all he could in the gospel field, Taylor studied and played music at the Institutional C.O.G.I.C. under the guidance of Dr. Carl Williams. He ended up assistant pastor and served as such for thirteen years. What Taylor lacked in vocal originality he made up for both with his piano styling and in his dramatic performance technique.

His first recordings surfaced on the Tuxedo label in 1954, after he had gathered and prepared his Gospel All Star Singers who featured the young Kitty Parham. Parham joined forces with Marion Williams and the Stars of Faith in 1958 and now heads up the all-gal group who regularly perform all over Europe each year. Taylor and the all female All Stars traveled throughout the U.S. and abroad. In 1958, after Parham’s departure, he formed the Taylor Singers and signed with Herman Lubinsky’s Savoy label in Newark, N.J.

His recordings never seemed to match the strength of his live performances which were sometimes devastating. He played New York’s Carnegie Hall, Apollo Theatre, Coliseum and Brooklyn Academy of Music as well as dates at the Philadelphia Met, Baltimore Coliseum and Atlanta’s City Auditorium plus major venues in Georgia, Ohio, South Carolina and Louisiana.

Two years after being ordained at the C.O.G.I.C. in Brooklyn, Taylor switched to the Chicago-based Vee Jay label where he formed a new Taylor Singers of mixed gender. Taylor’s piano is heavily based on the late Prof. Alex Bradford’s with Roberta Martin-type ornaments and chord explosions sometimes reminiscent of some of Bradford’s climactic embellishments. He trained his singers in the old Baptist Roberta Martin technique: sharp, tight and precise.

During the late 1960s he recorded for Hob, Scepter’s gospel subsidiary. Later Hob sides were recorded at the Washington Temple C.O.G.I.C. in Brooklyn. Taylor moved to Maryland in the 1970s. From 1976 to 1980 he pastored the Deliverance House of Prayer in Westover and is currently serving at the Love, Faith & Deliverance Church in Salisbury. Back with an all-female vocal group, Taylor sings and plays piano in the same explosive fashion.

--- Opal Louis Nations, October 1999

with invaluable assistance from Prof. Herbert "Pee Wee" Pickard, Evelyn Starks Hardy, Rev. Prof. Charles Taylor, Prof. Horace Clarence Boyer and Prof. James Buchanan Boyer.