

UPDATE ON THE
PRAYING GROUNDS
PROJECT



This photo is included in Praying Grounds' Cleveland Memory collection of 50th and 70th anniversary materials for the Wings Over Jordan. See page seven of this newsletter for more information on this growing collection.



The narratives of Betty Jenkins and the Rev. Dr. Valentino Lassiter of the Eastview United Church of Christ are the most recent additions to the Praying Grounds collection. Their church is located in Shaker Heights, Ohio.

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TRADITIONS AND BELIEFS

A QUARTERLY PUBLICATION OF THE INITIATIVE FOR THE STUDY OF RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY IN THE HISTORY OF AFRICA AND THE DIASPORA (RASHAD)

BEYOND SOUND BITES AND BETWEEN BOOK COVERS: LESSONS FROM AFRICAN AMERICAN LIFE AND HISTORY



Audience members at Black Studies' April 2008 panel discussion on James Cone's scholarship.

Commentary

By Regennia N. Williams, PhD

Sometimes a few spoken or written words can make a powerful and positive difference in an individual's life. During the April 2008 commemorations of the 40th anniversary of the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., I had the opportunity to recall three life-changing moments and the memorable words associated with them.

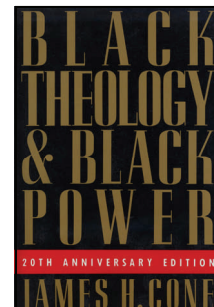
First and foremost, I remembered my feelings of shock and sadness on the evening of April 4, 1968, when I heard the newscaster say that Dr. King had been assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee. I also remembered that, approximately one week later, every student and teacher in my elementary school sat down together to watch Dr. King's funeral on television. In that historical moment, we understood that our lives were interconnected with the lives of millions of people around the world, as we joined them in mourning the passing of the minister and human rights activist who urged people to challenge injustice everywhere.

Nearly 16 years separate Dr. King's death from another significant point in time. I cannot remember the exact date, but I know that it was sometime during the 1984-85 academic year. As a student member of Cleveland State University's Black Aspirations Week planning committee, I participated in a discussion about a proposed program on the life and legacy of Malcolm X (El Hajj Malik El Shabazz). Knowing that 1985 would mark the 20th anniversary of his assassination, I agreed to invite Malcolm's widow, Dr. Betty Shabazz, to participate in our proposed program.


When I made the call to Medgar Evers College, the receptionist insisted that Dr. Shabazz was too busy to speak with me, but I persisted, and he put the call through. As soon as I heard Dr. Shabazz speak, my nerves got the best of me, and my tongue tied itself in knots. In that historical moment, Dr. Shabazz said something like, "Okay, sweetheart, calm down, and tell me exactly what you want." Although budget constraints did not allow us to bring her to CSU, I always appreciated the fact that Dr. Shabazz, a woman who had witnessed her husband's assassination in 1965, found a moment in her busy day to speak calming words to me.

Another memorable moment occurred in January 1991, during the second semester of my doctoral studies at Case Western Reserve University. I was in the presence of the Rev. Dr. James H. Cone, a brilliant scholar-theologian and an outspoken proponent of Black Liberation Theology. Dr. Cone's spell-binding oratory had just captivated a capacity crowd in Cleveland's McCreary Center for African American Religious Studies. After the lecture, Dr. Cone agreed to autograph my copy of *Black Theology & Black Power*. His inscription, "Justice & Peace," spoke volumes to me, and Dr. Cone taught me some important lessons about the power of spoken and written words.

As we approach the 40th anniversary of the publication of *Black Theology & Black Power*, the words of Dr. King, Malcolm X, Dr. Cone, and other proponents of Black Liberation Theology are being debated publicly and privately. I invite you to join me in discussing *Black Theology & Black Power* on Thursday, June 19, 2008, from 6p.m. until 8 p.m., in room 437 of Cleveland State University's Main Classroom Building. I am convinced that this discussion could lead to another "teachable moment" in my life.



NEW LOGOS FOR PRAYING GROUNDS AND RASHAD



"I feel that art and life are synonymous."

- Fred M. Mitchum


The RASHAD / "Praying Grounds" team is putting the finishing touches on a new marketing campaign. The RASHAD logo now incorporates a world map, as a constant reminder of our efforts to understand the role of religion and spirituality in the lives of African-descended peoples throughout the global community.

We will continue to use our original "Praying Grounds" collage on the website, newsletter, and other full-color print materials. Starting in the fall of 2008, however, our stationary, program brochures, and other items produced in black and white will also incorporate the new "Praying Grounds" / Baobab Tree logo. One version of a preliminary sketch by artist Fred M. Mitchum is shown above.

Our research team decided to include the Baobab tree in the new logo, because, as Robert Fay states in *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience*, the Baobab tree is "a large African tree found primarily in semi-arid regions, where it is highly valued by many African peoples." The tree's spiritual significance, adaptability in extreme environmental conditions, and longevity make it the perfect symbol for our project. The extremely large trunk—sometimes 30 feet in diameter—gives the Baobab tree a distinct look, and that should make for a recognizable and memorable logo.

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PROFILE: FRED M. MITCHUM ARTIST AND CSU STUDENT



"I have always enjoyed art. I took four years of art in high school and I took a semester of engineering drawing at Cuyahoga Community College. After years of being out of school, my wife and other family members convinced me that I should pursue my dream, and become an art educator. This my is sophomore year, and I have already learned quite a bit about art history from Dr. Cathy Thomas and Dr. Pamela McKee in the CSU Art Department. "

"When the "Praying Grounds" team asked me to work on this project, I became very interested in learning more about the Baobab tree. We rarely talk about it, but the tree is so impressive, and it lives for hundreds of years. It is my understanding that in some cultures people bury their dead in the trunks of the Baobab tree. I am very much interested in learning more about the place of this tree in African cultures. It would be great to take a vacation just to see one of these trees up close. This tree should be one of the wonders of the world!"

SPECIAL FEATURE - SPRING 2008

SPIRITUAL GIFTS: ORAL TRADITIONS AND THE MUSIC OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN CHURCH



(left to right) Eloise Burnett, Regennia Williams, unidentified woman, and Odessa Still



Rev. Melvin Kenniebrew

PART ONE: CLEVELAND'S GOSPEL QUARTETS



William "Dub" (left) and Fred Burton



(left to right) Brenda Abrams, Harry Boomer, William "Dub" Burton, and Eloise Burnett.

SPIRITUAL GIFTS:
ORAL TRADITIONS AND
THE MUSIC OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN CHURCH

THE MUSICAL LIFE OF AN AFRICAN AMERICAN FAITH
COMMUNITY: CONFESSIONS OF AN ENGAGED SCHOLAR

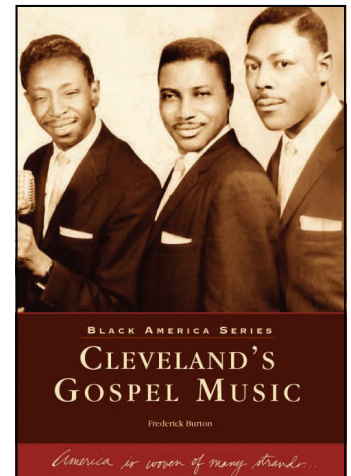
By Regennia N. Williams, PhD

Much of what I know today about the history of gospel quartets I learned in my childhood. My family attended Cleveland's New Joshua Missionary Baptist Church, where the Rev. C. W. Vance was pastor. Local gospel singers often referred to our church as "The Holy Ghost's Headquarters," and more than a few quartet singers called New Joshua home.

I grew up listening to the Missionary Gospel Singers, because they were also members of our church. This group of sisters from Arkansas helped me appreciate such quartet classics as "Let the Church Roll On" and "Walk around My Bed." From time to time, the Elite Jewels, "The Gospel Songbirds of the North," would visit our church and sing "Bedside of a Neighbor" and "It's So Wonderful to Pray."

I grew up singing "Nearer, My God, to Thee," because another church member, Mrs. Pauline Greer, sang lead on that song. Years later, upon hearing recordings of this work by Sam Cooke and the legendary Soul Stirrers, I thought it interesting that they were singing Mrs. Greer's song!

(Continued on page 5)



The Burton Family Singers.



Frederick Burton, (above and second row, far right, in photo to the left), co-founder of the Gospel Music Historical Society and author of *Cleveland's Gospel Music*

SPIRITUAL GIFTS: ORAL TRADITIONS AND THE MUSIC OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN CHURCH

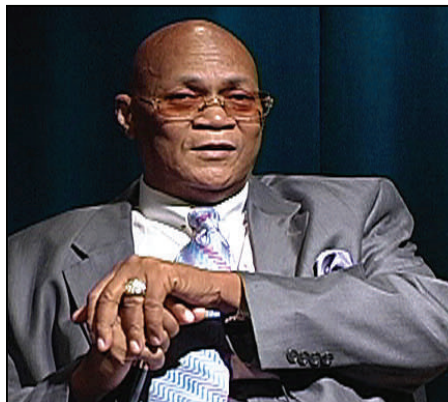
CONFESSIONS

(Continued from page 4)

Like Sam Cooke, the son of an African American minister and a native of the South, the members of New Joshua were keepers of their own brand of oral traditions. Caleb Taylor and Walter Humphrey moved with ease from the singing of duets to singing lead and background in the male chorus and the Voices of New Joshua, a chorus of mixed voices.

All of these individuals were excellent vocalists. These men and women were also excellent teachers, and I learned some very valuable lessons at New Joshua. As an adult, I appreciate these lessons even more, because I now have a better understanding of the long history of African Americans and their contributions to world music.

I am proud to follow the lead of Dr. Horace C. Boyer, a renowned gospel



Rev. Melvin Kenniebrew, lead singer for the Sensational Saints



Rev. Melvin Kenniebrew (bottom step) and the Sensational Saints



William "Dub" Burton, co-founder of the Gospel Music Historical Society and member of the Master Keys gospel quartet



The Master Keys c. 1965.

"Dub" is on the top row, far left.

musician and musicologist, in documenting the history of African American sacred music. I am also glad that the study of these songs is not limited to those in the academy. Graphic artist Fred Burton, for example, is a member of the Burton Family Singers and the Master Keys. Burton is also the co-founder of the Gospel Music Historical Society and the author of *Cleveland's Gospel Music* (Arcadia, 2003).

Traditions and Beliefs salutes the Burtons and all of Cleveland's outstanding quartet singers in Part I of **Spiritual Gifts: Oral Traditions and the Music of the African American Church.**

Like Fred Burton, many of these singers excelled in other areas. Rev. Walter Humphrey and Rev. Melvin Kenniebrew are now senior pastors of congregations in Cleveland.

(Continued on page 6)

SPIRITUAL GIFTS:
ORAL TRADITIONS AND
THE MUSIC OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN CHURCH



Odessa Still (1920-2008)
former member of the Deep
River Songbirds

(CONFESSIONS, Continued from page 5)

Denver Wilborn, Brenda Abrams, and the late Odessa Still went on to become award-winning radio announcers and concert promoters, thereby helping to launch the musical careers of countless others.

Odessa Still passed away in March of 2008, after donating an extensive collection of recordings and her Praying Grounds oral history interview to the Cleveland State University Library. For more information on these materials, use the keyword search feature of the library's Scholar Catalog to find items for "Odessa Still." Mrs. Still's oral history interview is now available online at www.ClevelandMemory.org/pray/. Interviews for William "Dub" Burton, Frederick Burton, Brenda Abrams, and Rev. Melvin Kenniebrew are also included in the our collection, and they will soon be available for online viewing.

Our Summer 2008 issue will pay special tribute to gospel choirs in Cleveland and choir members whose narratives are part of the "Praying Grounds" collection.



The Deep River Songbirds. Odessa Still is third from the right, and Eloise Burnett is third from the left.

MARK YOUR CALENDARS!

Monday, June 23, 4 p.m.
"Ellington, Music, and God"
CSU, MC 437

Tuesday, June 24, 4 p.m.
"The Music of the Wings Over
Jordan," Dr. Sam Barber
CSU, MC 437

Saturday, June 28, 6 p.m.
Maestro Piano Concert, \$
CSU, MC Auditorium

See and hear Odessa Still's Praying Grounds Oral History Interview at www.ClevelandMemory.org/pray/.

If you or someone you know would like to be interviewed for this project, please contact Dr. Regennia N. Williams at
(216) 523-7183 or r.williams@csuohio.edu.

**Color images of "Dub" Burton and Rev. Melvin Kenniebrew are taken from their Praying Groups Interviews. Other color photos courtesy of Regennia N. Williams. Black and White photos courtesy of Fred Burton.*

WEB UPDATES

WINGS OVER JORDAN MATERIALS IN THE CLEVELAND MEMORY COLLECTION



Mrs. Gladys Hauser Goodloe, a former member of the original Wings Over Jordan choir, recently agreed to share her rich collection of Wings memorabilia with the “Praying Grounds” research team. When Mrs. Goodloe joined the choir in 1939, she was a senior at Cleveland’s Central High School and the youngest member of the group. Today, Mrs. Goodloe sings with the Wings Over Jordan Celebration Chorus.

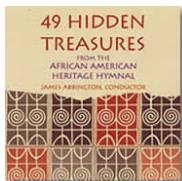
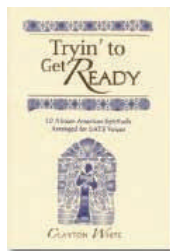
A longtime Cleveland resident and a member of the Antioch Baptist Church, Mrs. Goodloe was the first person to be interviewed for the Praying Grounds Oral History Project. Excerpts from her interview are available in the introductory video on our website at www.ClevelandMemory.org/pray/.

Gladys Hauser Goodloe (far right) with members of the original Wings Over Jordan choir in 1941.

For more information on the Wings Over Jordan Celebration Chorus, visit the website for Wings Over Jordan Alumni & Friends, Inc. at <http://www.wingsoverjordanalumniandfriendsinc.org/>

ADDITIONS TO LIBRARY COLLECTIONS

During the spring semester of 2008, “Praying Grounds” received additional program support from the Dean’s Office of the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences. These funds will be used to collect and process more oral histories, produce short video documentaries on “Praying Grounds” and the Wings Over Jordan, digitize documents related to the history of African American faith communities, and purchase new items for the University Library collections, including books, music scores, and audio and video recordings.



Recent purchases include, *Trying to Get Ready*, thirty African American spirituals arranged for SATB voices, *49 Hidden Treasures from the African American Heritage Hymnal*, a two CD set, and octavos from GIA’s African American Church Music Series.



Dr. James Abbotson leads a new music seminar at Cleveland’s Antioch Baptist Church. Dr. Abbotson is the Executive Editor of GIA’s African American Church Music Series and Associate Professor of Music and Worship at the Candler School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta.



Teretha Settle Overton attended the April 26th Wings Over Jordan Workshop. Overton, a CSU alumna, is shown here with a picture of her grandfather, the Rev. Glenn T. Settle, founder of the Wings Over Jordan.

**RASHAD
AND
PRAYING GROUNDS:
ON CAMPUS, IN THE
COMMUNITY, AND
ACROSS THE COUNTRY!**



Murtle Mell (standing left) and Rose Simmons, members of Wings Over Jordan Alumni & Friends, Inc., are pictured here with GIA's Garrett Jackson (left) and Dr. James Abbingtion at Cleveland's Antioch Baptist Church .



Dr. Regennia N. Williams (left) and Dr. Delores Aldridge, keynote speaker for the Butler A. Jones Scholarship Dinner. Dr. Aldridge's research suggests that religious institutions can play a key role in helping to strengthen African American families.



(left to right) Serreta Archer, Patrick Duhaney, Dr. Carolyn Turner, and Dr. Regennia N. Williams at the STARS Conference in Cincinnati, Ohio. Duhaney, a former Praying Grounds Research Assistant, is pursuing his Ph.D. at the University of Cincinnati.

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