

Long Islanders feel the

As PBS airs a documentary on the genre this week, the form is alive and well at churches spanning the Island

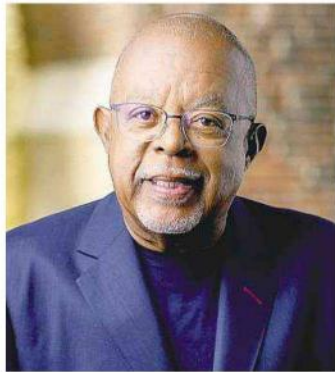
BY RAFER GUZMÁN
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Walk into the First Baptist Church of Bridgehampton as service begins, and the very first sound you'll hear is music.

"We welcome you," the five women of the Joyful Praise choir sang on a recent rainy Sunday morning. Backed by a drummer, a keyboardist and Minister of Music Jeff Roberson on the church's Hammond B3 organ, the ensemble kept up a simple but soaring refrain as congregants filed in: "First Baptist Church of Bridgehampton / We welcome you!" By the time the hour-plus service was over, the group had run through a concert's worth of gospel songs and hymns, including "Blessed Assurance," "Lord You Are Good" and "I've Got a Feeling."

"It's a connection," said Roberson, 63, who has been playing and composing gospel songs for more than 40 years and goes by the nickname Professor. Just about every week, he can spot someone in the crowd who is "moving in the spirit," as he puts it. "And at that point, that moment, that little one-on-one moment between me and that person — a song comes to me."

Gospel music is about to step into the spotlight thanks to a four-part documentary, "Gospel," airing on PBS on Monday and Tuesday at 9 p.m. Narrated by Henry Louis Gates Jr., the series traces the history of a music that was born in the Black churches of the American South and steadily spread across the country during the Great Migration of the early 20th century. "Gospel" touches on popular icons such as Mahalia Jackson and Sister Rosetta Tharpe as well as historical figures like Thomas A. Dorsey, the influential songwriter known as "The Father of Gospel Music."



Henry Louis Gates Jr. hosts the four-part PBS documentary "Gospel" on Monday and Tuesday night at 9.

The series was preceded last Friday by "GOSPEL Live!," a special episode that captured such performers as Lena Byrd Miles, The Ton3s and Anthony Hamilton in concert at the Oasis Church in Los Angeles.

"I welcomed our audience to experience the night like a regular church service," said Kristen V. Carter, a Hofstra alum who produced the concert and served as the series' showrunner. "So if they felt like they wanted to clap their hands or shout, they had the invitation to do so. Having that energy, it wasn't about television or production. It was about the acknowledgment of praise and worship."

'ENTRANCED BY GOSPEL'

"Gospel" is a follow-up to Gates' 2021 series "The Black Church: This Is Our Story, This Is Our Song." "I've been entranced by gospel music since I was a kid," Gates said in a telephone interview. "I wanted to focus on the two key elements of a successful Black church service. One is the music, the language of Black sacred music.



The group United in Christ Soundsosweet, whose members come from Roosevelt, Hempstead and Freeport, rehearse in Rockville Centre.

And the other is the musicality of the preacher's sermon. And the sermon and the music are inextricably intertwined."

That insight is "absolutely correct," according to Pastor Tisha Dixon-Williams of the Bridgehampton church. She pointed to one recent sermon, titled "I'm Still Standing," which Roberson followed seamlessly with "Standing on the Promises," a hymn that dates to 1886. "While the musicians are telling their story through song, it's the preacher's job to tell a similar story through words," she said.

COMPLICATED HISTORY

The history of gospel music is as complicated as the history of

spirit of gospel music



Members of the Joyful Praise choir perform during Sunday worship at the First Baptist Church of Bridgehampton. **Video: newsday.tv**

A primer on classic gospel

The history of recorded gospel is wide and deep, stretching back to the 1920s. If you're looking to wade into that river, here's where to start.

THOMAS A. DORSEY A Georgia-born bluesman, Dorsey underwent a religious epiphany in the late 1920s and began writing spirituals that proved hugely popular; he's credited with almost single-handedly inventing what we now call gospel. You can hear him briefly narrate his life story on a 1973 album, "Precious Lord: New Recordings of the Great Songs of Thomas A. Dorsey," which features various artists performing his compositions.

SISTER ROSETTA THARPE An absolute original, Tharpe became a sensation in the late 1930s by performing gospel tunes with — good heavens! — an electric guitar. It's hard to find an earlier rock and roller; Chuck Berry, Elvis Presley and Johnny Cash cited her as an influence. Her 1956 album "Gospel Train" should be easy to find on streaming platforms.

MAHALIA JACKSON The granddaughter of enslaved Louisianans, Jackson grew up singing in a New Orleans church before joining the Great Migration to Chicago. There, she began recording for Decca Records and steadily became what Dorsey called "The Empress of Gospel." With her forceful voice and bluesy delivery, Jackson helped define the Golden Age of Gospel from the 1940s through the '60s.

THE EDWIN HAWKINS SINGERS In 1967, this San Francisco Bay Area-based choir recorded an 18th century hymn, "Oh Happy Day," at a Berkeley church. Augmented by hand claps and a propulsive piano, the song exuded such joy that the San Francisco rock station KSAN picked it up and turned it



Sister Rosetta Tharpe, here in 1957, influenced many early rockers.

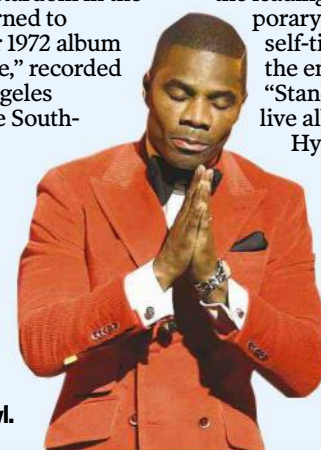


Singer Mahalia Jackson during a tour rehearsal in 1961.

into a hit. "Oh Happy Day" reached the U.S. Top 10 in 1969, won a Grammy and became a gospel staple. The group has a handful of albums available on streaming services.

ARETHA FRANKLIN Though known as the Queen of Soul, Franklin sang in her father's Detroit church as a child. After rising to stardom in the 1960s, she returned to gospel with her 1972 album "Amazing Grace," recorded live at a Los Angeles church with the Southern California Community Choir. It became her best-selling album and earned a Grammy; there's also an

Kirk Franklin performs at the 2019 Super Bowl.



eponymous documentary about the concert, directed by Sidney Lumet.

KIRK FRANKLIN Whether solo or leading a group, Franklin (no relation to Aretha) is one of the most popular gospel singers of the contemporary era. Touching on soul and hip-hop as well as traditional gospel, Franklin has won numerous Grammys and Dove Awards (bestowed by the Gospel Music Association). Franklin's 2023 album "Father's Day" was accompanied by a short documentary in which he discovers the identity of his birth father.

DONNIE MCCLURKIN Born in Copiague, McClurkin endured a childhood of tragedy and abuse to become one of the leading lights of contemporary gospel. His 1996 self-titled LP produced the enduringly popular "Stand," and his 2005 live album "Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs" earned a Grammy. He founded the Perfecting Faith Church in Freeport, where he currently serves as pastor.

— RAFER GUZMÁN

ON THE COVER Sherina Butler, of Freeport, rehearses with United for Christ Soundsweet at the First Calvary Baptist in Rockville Centre.

Black life in America. "Gospel music is the African tradition basically merging with the white Christian church," said Kenyatta Beasley, an assistant professor of music and music production at Hofstra. On the one hand, he said, enslaved Black people were adopting the religion of their captors. On the other, "people who were enslaved needed some kind of vehicle to express themselves and to feel some kind of relief," he said.

"Gospel music," Beasley added, "is the nexus of all this coming together."

Another layer of historical tension lies in gospel's blend of religious music and secular Black idioms such as jazz, ragtime and blues. It's often difficult to tell where the hymns stop and the pop music begins: Mahalia Jackson, for instance, refused to sing secular music all her life but became a major influence on Ray Charles and Little Richard. Sam Cooke, who began his career as a gospel singer with the Soul Stirrers, notched his first pop single with "Lovable," a remake of the

See **GOSPEL** on C6

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RANDEE DADDONA

Feeling the spirit of gospel

GOSPEL from C5

gospel song “Wonderful.”

Gates formulates it this way: Spirituals + blues and jazz = gospel. “And it was also controversial,” he adds. One reason gospel singers traditionally wear loosefitting robes, he said, is because Jackson was told to wear one after a minister objected to the way she moved her body while performing.

As Black Americans pushed for civil rights in the 1960s, gospel songs often served as anthems. The Staple Singers, from Chicago, performed at many rallies and church services. “We Shall Not be Moved,” a spiritual that dates back to the days of slavery, was sung at the 1963 March on Washington. “We Shall Overcome,” surely the song most closely identified with the Civil Rights Era, is thought to have its roots in a hymn written by Charles Albert Tindley, a Black Methodist minister.

HEARD IN OTHER MUSIC

Even today, gospel can be heard in pop music, often as samples in hip-hop tracks. Kanye West may have started the trend when he sampled the Chicago preacher T.L. Barrett on his critically acclaimed track “Father Stretch My Hands Pt. 1,” from 2016. That same year, Drake sampled The Winans, a sibling gospel quartet, on his album “Views.” More recently, Beyoncé sampled The Clark Sisters on her 2022 hit album “Renaissance.”

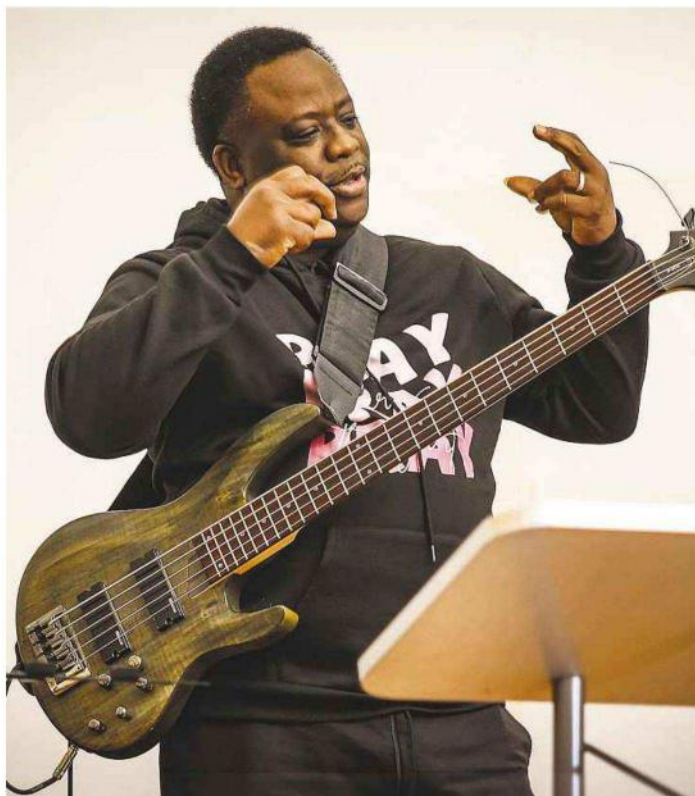
Gospel itself has evolved, too, as contemporary artists such as Kirk Franklin and Long Island’s Donnie McClurkin have incorporated pop rhythms and rap cadences into their sound. “Sometimes when you hear gospel it doesn’t sound like gospel anymore,” said Beasley. “A lot of this stuff is marketing: ‘Can we sell something that’s a new kind of Christian gospel to a new generation?’”

These days, traditional gospel choirs — ensembles wearing matching robes — aren’t as easy to find as they once were. COVID hit Long Island’s Black churches hard, according to local musicians and pastors, reducing in-person attendance and leading churchgoers to attend virtually instead. The Bridgehampton

Jeff Roberson, the minister of music at the First Baptist Church in Bridgehampton, performs during a Sunday service last month.



RANDEE DADDONA



NEWSDAY / THOMAS A. FERRARA

Bishop Anthony Rountree, of Bellport, leads United in Christ Soundsosweet. “The most enjoyment I get is performing live,” he says.

church, for one, livestreams its Sunday services and takes collections via CashApp.

“Everyone is kind of lackadaisical,” said Craig Jones, an associate pastor at Huntington’s Evergreen Missionary Baptist Church and a co-founder of the Christian Fellowship Choir. “When you’ve been on the internet for two years, and you tell people they’ve got to come out of their house, they can’t be on their iPad anymore, it’s very hard,” he said.

Leander Stevenson, an Amityville-based member of the gospel quartet HeavenSent, agreed: “Things have slowed down,” he said. “It’s mostly concerts, like at a church or a high school auditorium. Or in summer, it could be at a park.”

‘LIKE A FAMILY REUNION’

Still, the concerts are communal experiences and full of spirit, said gospel promoter Anthony McDaniels of Central Islip. “It’s always like a family reunion. And we have some good soul food there,” he said. “To bring everyone in one place for deliverance, for break-

through, to get their minds off anything that’s stressing them — it’s a wonderful feeling.”

One trend that seems to be going strong: gospel groups made up of members from different congregations across Long Island. Bishop Anthony Rountree, of Bellport, leads one called United in Christ Soundsosweet, which features singers and musicians from Roosevelt, Hempstead, Freeport, even Queens. Lately they’ve been gathering every Thursday night at another, unaffiliated church, First Calvary Baptist in Rockville Centre, to rehearse Rountree’s original gospel compositions for an upcoming show.

“The most enjoyment I get is performing live,” said Rountree, 53. “When you see how your music is affecting people who are going through things — sometimes it’s something they’re not saying verbally, but you see it. And sometimes they will come up to you and say, ‘Your song really inspired me today.’”

He added: “The music is a universal language.”