

Great God A'Mighty! The Dixie Hummingbirds: Celebrating the Rise of Soul Gospel Music

By Jerry Zolten (Oxford University Press, 2003)

African-American gospel music's impact on popular culture is immense, though not widely appreciated by the general public. The fundamental elements of gospel have informed and shaped the evolution of various secular genres, most obviously blues and R&B but also jazz, country, rock, and pop. The rich musical legacy ranges from its distinctively emotive style of full-throated vocalizing to call-and-response rituals and heavily syncopated rhythms, as well as its rhetorical capacity to convey spiritual experience in terms that are palpably physical and intensely personalized. Such qualities have profoundly influenced mainstream American music, directly and indirectly, throughout the twentieth century.

But even among those with some generalized understanding about soul gospel's status as a major foundation of modern music, most remain only vaguely aware at best of the key figures in defining and developing the genre. And with the possible exceptions of "the father of modern gospel" (Thomas Dorsey) and the undisputed "queen" of the form (Mahalia Jackson), no such figures were more important than the amazingly long-lived group The Dixie Hummingbirds.

Jerry Zolten's new book tells the story of "the Birds" (as he often refers to the ensemble) from their South Carolina origins in the 1920s through their over seventy year existence, incorporating excerpts from his interviews with surviving members and many of their associates. Interweaving his oral historical research with facts and observations culled from analysis of old recordings and various previously published materials (as well as accounts of some of his own personal experiences and sociological musings), Zolten delivers an informative narrative, not only in regard to the career of this particular gospel group but also in relation to the music business at large. And in this latter respect, he illuminates an important Texas connection: the Birds' long-running affiliation with Don Robey's Houston-based Peacock Records during the major phase of

their career (1952-1973, which parallels the golden era of this once powerful independent record company).

Great God A'Mighty! consists of 370 pages comprising nine chapters and various appendices (including notes, bibliography, discography, general index, index of groups, and index of gospel song titles). Arranged in standard chronological order, each chapter is titled after a line from a different gospel song, and each covers a specific time period, starting with "A Wheel in a Wheel, 'Way Up in the Middle of the Air' (1916-1928)" and concluding with "Who Are We? (1977 and beyond)." It is a story that follows the group from its Deep South birthplace to the big cities of the nation (especially Philadelphia and New York), from small churches and youth talent shows to major auditoriums and recording studios.

Along the way, the Birds cross paths with numerous famous musicians in and beyond gospel, including jazz saxophonist Lester Young (with whom they gigged regularly in one of the first racially integrated nightclubs in New York), jazz icons Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington (with whom they shared hotels and restaurants while touring in the days of racial segregation), and the blues master Willie Dixon (who was the in-studio producer for several of their Chicago recording sessions). By the 1970s they were even recording with a younger generation of pop stars such as Stevie Wonder and Paul Simon (with whom they won a Grammy for the hit 1973 single "Loves Me Like a Rock").

Zolten's primary oral historical source is the now 87-year-old group founder James Davis, who at the age of twelve organized the a cappella singing group called the Junior Boys ("the first incarnation of the Dixie Hummingbirds"), which later morphed into the Sterling High School Quartet and began to tour to regional acclaim. After dropping out of school in the early 1930s to focus full-time on gospel singing, Davis gave the group its ultimate moniker. As the Dixie Hummingbirds they eventually expanded from four to five then

ultimately six members, with various other personnel changes over the years.

It is not surprising that many of the group's alumni had died by the time Zolten began his fieldwork in 1995. However, in addition to Davis, he did locate and interview two other important members of the Birds, Ira Tucker and Howard Carroll, whose memories and explanations add valuable details and personal insights. Zolten fleshes out the narrative with oral historical input from a wide variety of secondary sources. One example of special note is the former Peacock Records and Buffalo Booking Agency insider Evelyn Johnson, whose business savvy helped propel the Birds to the top level of their profession during their twenty-one year tenure with those Texas companies.

This comprehensive tale of the Dixie Hummingbirds' career, intriguing as it is on its own, is told against a larger backdrop of social history, particularly that of the modern music industry and the civil rights movement. It is the story of a young black man from the South who started out performing ancestral spirituals in church and ended up leading the preeminent soul gospel group, one that would eventually collaborate with superstars and play Carnegie Hall. Zolten has effectively placed that story in its broader cultural context, making it accessible and relevant to a broad range of readers.

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The Roots of Texas Music

By Lawrence Clayton and Joe W. Specht. College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 2003

As Gary Hartman points out in his introductory chapter to *The Roots of Texas Music*, the fact that Texas was settled by many different ethnic groups who brought diverse music and culture with them, makes a book of this type a challenge to assemble. *The Roots of Texas Music* is not a chronological history of Texas music, nor is it truly a study of the roots of Texas music; rather it is a collection of specific essays dealing with limited subject areas, and written by contributors with varied specialties and viewpoints. Nonetheless, it is a good source book and a valuable contribution to Texas music scholarship.

There are but limited new ideas presented in these collected essays. For the most part, the contributors have sifted through existing major sources or, as in the case of the chapter on Texas jazz, reduced a monograph into a single chapter; however, this type of activity is important in that most general readers do not have the time or expertise to consult major sources for themselves. Someone who will not pick up an entire book on Texas jazz may be inclined to read one chapter on the subject.

The newest information comes from the chapter entitled "Black Creoles and the Evolution of Zydeco in Southeast Texas." It will come as a shock to most people, including this reviewer, that Zydeco was not entirely a product of French-speaking African Americans in Louisiana, but that there was a key Texas connection in the making of this music. It is

doubtful that this chapter will compel most people to incorporate Zydeco into the catalogue of forms of Texas music, but it was a daring move on the author's part.

The only chapter that really addresses specific roots of Texas music is the one entitled "Chicano Music, Evolution and Politics to 1950." However, it is more about politics and race relations in the Southwest than music.

It is nice to see a chapter devoted to classical music in Texas, although the author limits himself to a discussion of the German immigrants' contribution to the establishment of classical music and classical ensembles in the state. Much could have been added about composers, performers, and training programs in the state in the first half of the twentieth century.

It was a nice move to position the chapter entitled "Texan Jazz, 1920-50" near the beginning of the book, since so few people recognize Texas as a jazz center. It is unfortunate, however, that the author focused on those musicians who left the state and made their careers elsewhere, rather than on those who remained in Texas and created jazz for Texans.

One of the longest chapters in the book is devoted to Texas country music. As was the case in the jazz chapter, the author of the country music contribution focuses on country music performers who left the state rather than on those who remained in Texas.

Little is said of the tradition of cowboy ballads that fed into country music in Texas, or of the unique Texas fiddle tradition; and though the author claims unequivocally that western swing belongs to the "family" of country music, he does little to present this very important form of Texas music to his readers. Western swing is a type of fusion, a combination of country, jazz, and many other genres of music co-existing in Texas. Western swing, like other hybridized art forms, is often misunderstood. Jazz scholars ignore western swing because they consider it "country" music, and country music scholars limit it to the country field. Both sides miss an opportunity to fully address the most important and prominent form of music in Texas in the 1930s and 40s. Furthermore, this music never completely died out and has undergone a renaissance that is restoring its popularity with many Texans.

Much credit must go to Gary Hartman, whose introduction to *The Roots of Texas Music* created a framework that put all of these disparate essays into perspective. As is often the case with a book of collected essays, the writing styles and depth of information provided are not consistent throughout, but there are valuable chapters, and some new and daring viewpoints.

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