

A Traditional Music Challenged By Change

By ED OCHS

THE REVEREND JAMES CLEVELAND:



'We want to reach a wider range of people'

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The Reverend James Cleveland, Grammy Award winner and considered by many to be the world's greatest gospel singer, may be described as a traditional artist, but there's nothing stereotypically traditional in the way gospel's grand master welcomes all styles while drawing the line on his own performing standards.

"The creative people who write the music are the innovators," Cleveland said recently, as he prepared for the 13th annual Gospel Music Workshop, held in Philadelphia, Aug. 9-15. "All the different styles give a person just coming into the knowledge of gospel a chance to pick what he or she likes, whether they like contemporary, and there are those who like all phases of it.

"I think it's very healthy that we have five or six different styles of gospel, and I would even encourage other styles to come in; the reason, not so much that we don't have enough exponents putting the music out, but we want to reach a wider range of people, and if there are some more people who are just hooked on reggae, maybe we ought to have some reggae-gospel. The more sides of gospel we can get open, the better it is.

"I would say that my sole purpose for singing gospel is to reach people. If anyone who's in gospel tells you they're not interested in reaching people, then you just know an artist that's not dedicated to the work."

Despite the existence of charts, trophies, plaques and polls, and "worldly entertainers vying one against the other," Cleveland feels that in gospel. "We are not really against each other. We are really pulling each in our own way, each in our own field, to bring about a better understanding that Christ is here and He's for everybody. That's what we are really all about. I don't have any good will towards a performer in gospel who will stand up and tell you he's just in it for the money. Then you've just got a performer.

"I love the music, true enough, but if there was no gratification coming from just singing it, if there were no other rewards than just picking up a check for a performance, my interest I'm sure would have died a long time ago."

Rev. Cleveland's interest in making gospel records has, after more than 30 years, accumulated into a catalog of staggering artistic and historic proportions, testifying to the beauty and power in gospel music. He first recorded with the Caravans on the States label around 1950. His 1979 award-winning album, "I Don't Feel Noways Tired," is Savoy's all-time bestseller. That's right, a gospel best seller, one of six LPs he has on the spiritual chart.

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A Billboard Spotlight

SEPTEMBER 27, 1980 BILLBOARD

ANDRAE
CROUCH:
'... they
are
afraid
to make
a change'



GOSPEL
MUSIC

There's a war going on, a war within a war, and according to Andrae Crouch, gospel's contemporary comet, the field of battle is gospel music.

"Because music has such a vital part in bringing people together and teaching people and showing people the love of God, showing people *everything*—there is a spiritual warfare that fights against the new thing where people will accept more," Crouch said recently in Los Angeles, where he was writing new songs for the followup to his number one spiritual album, "I'll Be Thinking Of You," on Light Records.

He already has a new song he co-wrote with Stevie Wonder. And that's part of what the gospel in-fighting is all about.

Crouch also has a separate recording agreement with Warner Bros. Records with an album due January '81. And that's another part of the row.

Oh, yes, he also appeared on "Saturday Night Live," the satirical late-night television show, the first gospel writer/performer, black or white, to come to the attention of an audience that can launch a single, an album, a career practically overnight.

Now there are those who say that Andrae Crouch is "not a gospel artist anymore, but a pop artist singing gospel lyrics," that he's "too fancy" and aiding the "neglecting of what gospel music is all about."

"I think gospel people—we, ourselves," says Crouch, "have done more damage in keeping gospel down than what any secular radio station has done, by taking it for granted, 'Oh, it won't sell.' You can condition yourself that you feel inferior about what you do, but you love it the most.

"The term 'gospel,' to me, is very hard for many people because they stereotype gospel, and sometimes the audiences and the people in power have more problems dealing with it because traditional is security. It has been with us, and they are afraid to make a change. But the pop field, I feel, experiments a lot."

Crouch feels he has more to say than being dictated to by "people in power. So many times I have to risk being at the top of the charts, I have to risk having my songs sung by every choir across the country to deliver my soul, and I'm willing to do that. In the long run it pays off for me to feel free, to speak on subjects I've always wanted to talk about or say in a different way.

"For me to look at Jesus hanging on the cross, that's been said by a million people. Sometimes I want to look at Jesus

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James Cleveland

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Cleveland credits the rise of religious television and its larger-than-radio audiences for helping to bring on a greater awareness of gospel. "The medium of tv has brought new names and new talents to people. They were great talents all the time but they were suffering from one thing—a lack of exposure. We've been here all the time, but they have not felt there was a commercial value to it, and until the Wall Street people see that we can sell records, we can sell products, also, now it has come to the attention of a small group of people who looked at the figures and facts and found out that we sell records."

1980 is the year Andrae Crouch appeared on "Saturday Night Live." 1980 is also the year Rev. Cleveland did not appear on "Saturday Night Live," but it wasn't because he wasn't invited.

"They called me to go on 'Saturday Night Live,'" he says, "but I wouldn't go because I felt the show was, number one, too controversial, too risqué. Andrae went on and I think he did a very good job for gospel music. I enjoyed Andrae's performance—it may have done something for Andrae as an artist—but I don't think it did anything for the cause."

"What are they trying to prove on a show of that caliber to have a religious side after they've been as risqué as they could be? Then to turn around and end the show with a gospel song. There had been no other mention of religion, spiritual quality or anything on the entire show, so they were, in essence, presenting Andrae as a performer, not as a religious personality. I mean they gave him time to sing and that's all, but he's about more than singing."

"There are people who know I'm here, and whether I go on 'Saturday Night Live' or not, they know I'm here, and they've got to know somewhere along the line that you stand for something."

There are those who might invent other reasons why Cleveland refused the exposure he otherwise so tirelessly seeks. "A lot of people will hurry up and tell you, well, the reason he doesn't do it is because he's made his money, he's done well in gospel. Well, I have done well in gospel, but I found that I didn't have to sell out in order to make it. I actually believe in the music. I am not just singing to make a living."

One doesn't need a Gallup poll to tell us we are living in an age of crisis after crisis, and "in times of crisis people turn to the church more than they ever do." The church thrives, says Rev. Cleveland, "because people feel the need to cling to something to carry them through these harder times. With all the things happening in the world today, I would definitely say that people are, if they're not turning to, they are at least becoming more aware that there's going to have to be some kind of higher power to bring us through these chaotic times."

People are becoming aware that "man, at his epitome, has messed up everything." Searching for an out, an escape, "People, we feel, have turned the church off and turned teaching and preaching off, as we know it. We have found through the medium of music that many people are turned towards the church, and they will tell you it's because they like the music, but the music is not the prime thing in gospel—it's the message coupled with the tune. So we feel like we're not resorting to trickery to get somebody to hear a religious message, but we feel that we must use all the tools, just like on Broadway—they use bright lights to attract—so we must use the tools of the trade to attract people to Christ."

"If we can't preach to people in a dry, talking sermon and get their attention, we'll sing it to them, as long as we get the message across. We have been instrumental in drawing more people to the church in recent years through singing and getting them to find favor with something in the church they like to identify with. Then when we get them into the church, putting the same message into words without music is not as hard, for we have set some type of precedent with the music to get them into the church and get them focused on where we're coming from."

Rev. Cleveland believes there remain many misconceptions about gospel. "There are producers who actually feel that all gospel music is loud, hand-clapping, rip-roaring tambourine-beating music—and that's not true." Traveling gospel shows, such as the Clara Ward Singers, early on brought the glitter and glamor of gospel showmanship to Europe, "doing the holy dance to please the appetite of the audience more so than waiting to do it under the unction of the Holy Spirit," epitomizing the image of gospel music for years to come. The few informative, but according to Cleveland inauthentic and misguided gospel books "have not even scratched the surface in bringing to the forefront the real, real exposure of gospel and the real story behind it." To get that story, says Cleveland, you have to go to pioneer exponents of gospel music, to "really search the souls of the elderly black people who could take you back and really tell you about gospel music and what it has meant to them from slavery till now to get a real synopsis of gospel." No book has yet been written about Cleveland, and he's not holding his breath, since he feels publishers probably consider him worth more dead than alive, and he has no intention of cooperating.

"Proud but not satisfied," Cleveland feels he has a lot yet to accomplish. "There are people that I still have not reached that I feel I have the influence at this time to reach." To this goal, the Gospel Music Workshop, of which he is founder and president, expects to record its largest attendance, about 20,000, at this year's session.

"The aim of the workshop is, first of all, to perpetuate gospel music and to upgrade the quality of performance. Since there are no accredited schools you can go to and learn it, we have an association whereby those who are gifted in the art

will share their knowledge with those who aspire to be in gospel music. We have classes in all fields and phases of gospel music where people who aspire can come and get in those classes and learn more about gospel, plus, learn the history and heritage of gospel music.

"We don't inhibit anybody. We want everybody to be as creative as they can be. If they're in gospel and they want to bring a new dimension to this particular work we'd like to hear it. We're not closed-minded. We'd like to have innovations because we find that there are people who are so into music."

"There are people who like the traditional sounds of gospel, there are those who embrace the contemporary sound, and then there are those looking for sounds even beyond that, so we don't inhibit anybody. We'd like for them to have full expression that relates to where they would like to go. All we ask for them to do is to be mindful of what the music is about. Firstly, that it's a music, but secondly that it's a representation of a religious thinking. Gospel singing is the counterpart of gospel teaching, so we'd like to have that uppermost in their minds; that it's an art form, true enough, but it represents an idea, a thought, a trend."

For Cleveland, his Gospel Workshop of America contains the seeds of bright gospel tomorrows, "a vehicle for bringing unknown talent to the attention of the public."

"I would like to see a college erected somewhere on the campus of some black university with the intention of making gospel music an accredited course by which somebody could go and expound and actually receive a degree, because the music is so prolific and so profound. I would like to see a college of fine arts that would be about the teaching and perpetuation of gospel music, because if somebody does not strive to perpetuate it, I don't think it will ever die, but the popularity of it might diminish."

"That's why I feel it's important for us to get as many interested exponents of it into it... so that when one dies off another will step right in and keep it going. And that's my ultimate dream."

Andrae Crouch

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hanging on the cross, but I want to zero in on the eyes of the people looking at Him, moreso maybe than the suffering in His eyes, which is already understood. For me to find it significant to even write of that should qualify my belief in the whole concept.

"I think that we do more—I always say 'we' because maybe I've been guilty of it at times—we do more in holding back the progress of the message of gospel. The word gospel means good news of Jesus Christ. Whatever musical form it may take or has to take, we have restricted it to a certain audience. I got hate mail from being on 'Saturday Night Live' and I got 'God bless you, Andrae, we're with you 1,000 per cent.' I mean I literally got hate mail from people who said I'm casting pearls before swine. I don't see how a Christian would ever believe that or really could feel that way when Jesus said, 'Go unto the highways and byways'."

Crouch believes we should give young people the option to hear good gospel entertainment, "with a God or biblical concept. It will cause a person who is not interested in any other form of gospel to listen and feel God's presence, whereas they did not listen and feel because they let a wall of stereotype and tradition pull them back."

Basically, Andrae Crouch is trying to dissolve the stereotype of gospel, which to many minds is a piano, organ, drums and a choir, which he sees as "an attraction, not an everyday appetite." Crouch's music has taken different forms, from grand hymns to jazz and jazz-rock to traditional gospel, "but I always have to have that flair of contemporary sound because that's me, and I cannot alienate myself from my roots and what still exists. My dad's choir sings hard-rocking gospel and I sing a hard-rocking gospel. It's a part of me, nothing can replace that, but still you like the new. But it's not which one you like the best, it's the one you like right now."

Traditional people are going to have to "update a lot," according to Crouch, "because more types of people, not just the down and out, so to speak, but the up and out are becoming Christians—doctors, lawyers, chemists, astronauts, baseball players, professional people, artists. God has always been doing it, but in mass now. This is that day."

"We are finally realizing that there are going to be some gospel artists, be it any category, who are finally trying to be themselves. Every Christian or gospel artist on record is not going to be an evangelist. He's not going to be the one who brings the net in for people to say, okay, Jesus, I accept you."

Crouch is trying to broaden the scope of Christians to "accept the concept that somebody's going to have to start writing a song about a relationship between a boy and a girl, but a Christian kind of song, a love song, how good it is to have a girl friend like you that loves God and I love God; that we don't have to go to bed together; that we can't live together because we have a God principle. I foresee that happening."

He plans no radical changes in his music, but Crouch is preparing his listeners "to get into him and to know where he's coming from" and for the day gospel songs may not mention Jesus or God.

"I'm serious about God. He's first in my life. My prime goal is to teach messages that mainly are not sometimes hit upon, because it's the old game of the church to say let's get born again and go on to heaven, forget all the inbetween, and there is an inbetween. There is an inbetween of racism, there's an inbetween of helping the poor and the needy."

"Stevie Wonder, to me, writes more gospel, more biblical theme concepts than a whole lot of gospel artists that say Jesus on every cut. It's a different thing to sing about God

than to sing to Him. There are gospel songs directly to Him, and a lot of times, even in black churches, there are songs about Him, what He has done for them, which is a little different. What I like to do in my music is show the different areas of His word that we will know exactly what we're doing when we do a particular thing."

"Everything that I write will be from the concept of the word of God, either to Him or about Him or about the way He thinks that we should be—His way—whether it's about trees growing or people budgeting their money."

For Crouch, the unchanging element of traditional gospel does not reflect the social change he finds people reaching to understand, nor his own mind, which to an increasing degree, reflects the public mind. So while, for Crouch, "gospel is good news from God," his music is more a blend of news and gospel with the accent on news, current, not history. If gospel is good news, then Andrae Crouch certainly has the latest news.

Crouch sits on the Presidential Commission for Energy Conservation and his observations of his own life in regard to conservation further reflect the growing inter-relationship of gospel and reality. "I used to run three tvs at a time. I didn't know we were in that much trouble, and I didn't really realize that one person had that much power in helping to conserve. But we're in trouble, our country is in trouble and the world is in trouble, and the love of God allows that reality to sit on the seat of every man."

"There is a reaching up now where there used to be a hardness, and a lot of people think it's because of the music because they like a particular thing. But in the middle of it all, they feel something. People think it's only because of the art form, but it is God tenderizing their hearts because he sees them reaching."

On the other hand, there's the "spiritual warfare," an invasion of shifting, dubious and double standards in gospel, primarily in religious radio. Occasionally, the warfare works in Crouch's favor, since gospel radio has discovered that changing to contemporary has brought in new listeners, younger listeners, and with them, new sponsors and big money. But business bottom-liners, Crouch feels, with their ratings, money and musical bigotry, are gradually squeezing the life out of religious radio, making religious tv a welcome and well-deserved alternative for gospel musicians seeking even wider exposure.

In Crouch's case, however, the critics and the people in power have accepted him, he feels. A few haven't. "Any way the word is heard is great. I don't care who's doing it, but if somebody says, 'We don't play Andrae Crouch because we don't like that song,' then some guy who's never done a gospel song puts 'How Great Thou Art' on his record and because of his name they'll play it, not even caring what their standard is."

"Satan is fool enough to think that he can win, and if he can't he's going to say, well, you're not going to get this one, you're not going to get that one. So he tries to kill that Janis Joplin, that Jimi Hendrix, but then he raises up a person with the same background, a B.J. Thomas, a Bob Dylan, and these people are going to say something. They're going to have more influence than maybe that other person would have had; so you're going to lose out anyway. That's what the battle is all about, and for those of us who are not just interested in being No. 1 on the charts, we have to fight and speak what He wants us to speak, but if we ever get off of that track we lose out. We lose out on being prophetic."

"We are living in a very important time," says Crouch. "I really feel a heavy responsibility."

Crouch will record a new Light album, then his Warners album, with more tv appearances and producing new artists scheduled in between. New titles he's written include "No Room For Rumors," "Handwriting On The Wall" and "Waiting For The Son." "I can't say one album will be different from the other, just wherever I am musically, whatever I feel each album will communicate with the most people. Warners told me that they just wanted good music. They don't care what I say. I'm excited."

Finally and "first," says Crouch, "I'm a Christian, then I'm an artist, and I happen to be black. But Christ affects all those areas of my life. I do not feel that a Christian architect has to build just churches, but the way that he builds what he builds will have a Christian concept where when he's contracting he's going to do a good job because he knows that God would have him give a man his money's worth."

"And maybe a little big extra."