

FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF MUSIC

“JUST IN CASE YOU’VE FORGOTTEN”: A HISTORICAL AND ANALYTICAL SURVEY
OF THOMAS WHITFIELD AND HIS IMPACT ON
CONTEMPORARY GOSPEL MUSIC

By
BRANDON CHRISTIAN WADDLES

A Dissertation submitted to the
College of Music
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

2019

Copyright © 2019 Brandon Christian Waddles

ProQuest Number: 13812265

All rights reserved

INFORMATION TO ALL USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.



ProQuest 13812265

Published by ProQuest LLC (2019). Copyright of the Dissertation is held by the Author.

All rights reserved.

This work is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code
Microform Edition © ProQuest LLC.

ProQuest LLC.
789 East Eisenhower Parkway
P.O. Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106 – 1346

Brandon Christian Waddles defended this dissertation on April 5, 2019.

The members of the supervisory committee were:

André J. Thomas
Professor Directing Dissertation

Leon Anderson
University Representative

Kevin Fenton
Committee Member

Katarzyna “Kasia” Bugaj
Committee Member

The Graduate School has verified and approved the above-named committee members, and certifies that the dissertation has been approved in accordance with university requirements.

To the memories of:

Ruthie Jean, Johnnie B., Myrtle Christie, Brazeal Dennard, “G.P.” Darryl Houston

and

The Maestro...Thomas Anthony Whitfield

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To God be the glory, great things He has done! He continues to show up and show out in ways unimaginable, and as undeserving as I am I will be forever grateful.

Mother Dearest...Gretchen Olivia, you are Scripture's virtuous woman in its purest form. Your prayers and your love keep me lifted wherever I go, so we'll never be too far away from each other. I love you with my all.

Pops...before I learned of Thomas Whitfield, you were my Maestro. You still are, and you will always be the greatest musician I know. More than that, though, you're the best man I know. The consistent sacrifices you make for your children will ne'er go unnoticed. Every day I hope to make you half as proud to be my father as I am to be your son.

G-Ma...Gloria Blondelle, my lifeline thou art. Just by living you teach me every day about how to be a better person. I have never met anyone as selfless in their giving as you, and I hope to one day be able to take care of you as you've done for me. We still have so much traveling to do!

Thomas Eddie...Twin! I'll never forget your expression as you saw me walk the Morehouse green on Commencement Day. I wish you could be there with me for the last one...but in essence, you will. "God bless the child..."

Chelsea, Erin, Dominic...my gifted siblings. I may be the eldest, but I learn from each of you every day. And I'm so proud of each of you for all you do. I'm here for you...always.

To my committee members, thank you for agreeing to take part in this process. Drs. Kevin Fenton and Kasia Bugaj and Professor Leon Anderson, what amazing insight each of you have brought to my educational experience here at Florida State University. Dr. André J. Thomas...Doc, you saw something in me and you wouldn't let up until "it" came to be. At times I may regress, but I

know you'll never stop believing in me, so I'll never cease to ensure your work was not in vain.

Thank you for the push. Also, to my editor, Dr. Amy L. Bradley: you are a gem! Thank you.

I am so thankful for a musical village without compare. Nina Scott ("Ma"), Glenn Jones, Joseph Joubert, Stacey Gibbs, Drs. Uzee Brown, David Morrow, James Abbingtion, Leo Davis, Jr., Marvin Curtis, Roland Carter, Donald Dumpson, Raymond Wise, Rollo Dilworth, Emmett Price, Steve Pilkington, Joe Miller, James Jordan...I am simply in awe to read over this list of individuals who have helped shape my career. I am eternally grateful.

To my church and school communities in Detroit, Atlanta, New Jersey and Tallahassee...I

LOVE MY TRIBE!

Finally, to those that shared in conversation with me about Tommie...I'll never forget the laughs and tears. From the bottom of my heart, I thank you.

Rudolph Stanfield, Jr.
Michael Fletcher
Larry Whitfield
David Whitfield
T.J. Hemphill
Vanessa Bell Armstrong
Twinkie Clark
Fred Hammond
Byron Cage
Michael Mindingall
Yolanda Adams
Paul Morton
Gwen Morton
Volley Craig
Dana Davis
Donald Lawrence
Richard Smallwood
Donna Harris
A. Jeffrey LaValley
Stanley Brown
Alex Goss
Andre Woods
Earl J. Wright, Jr.
Capree Edwards
JoAnn Hill Brown
Sandra Hudson

Ron Kelly
Lydia Wright
Brian Spears
Dorgan Needom
Dr. Bobby Jones
Beverly Glenn
Herman Harris
Edgar Vann
V. Michael McKay
Darryl Ford
Phyllis Lyons
Lanar "Kearn" Brantley
Tyrone Block
Ramon Perry
David Brock
Trent Phillips
Steven Ford
Fred Nelson, III
Tony Walker
Rick Robinson
Percy Bady
Lillian Lloyd
Dameon Brown
Jonathan DuBose, Jr.
Earnest Pugh
Erik Miller

Jason Clayborn
Eric Brice
Avis Denise Graves
Darius Paulk
Charles Clency
Deborah Pollard
Andre Woods
Yvette Flunder
John Willis
Kenneth Alexander
Phillip A. Brooks
Sande Rose

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures	viii
List of Music Examples	ix
Foreword	x
Abstract	xii
 INTRODUCTION	 1
Need for the Study	1
Survey of Literature	2
Books Containing Reference to Whitfield	4
Dissertations Containing Reference to Whitfield	5
Chapter Overview	6
 1. A BIOGRAPHY OF THE MAESTRO	 7
The Foundation	8
The Company	13
The Master Producer	18
Vanessa Bell Armstrong	20
Keith Pringle	22
Bishop Paul Morton	23
Yolanda Adams	24
Aretha Franklin	25
Departing from Sound of Gospel	26
The Final Years	29
My Faith	29
Tommie and Gwenie	30
Alive and Satisfied	32
Opportunities of a Lifetime	33
The Final Week	34
June 20 th , 1992	36
The Aftermath	37
 2. INFLUENCES ON WHITFIELD	 42
Alfred Bolden	43
Herbert “Pee-Wee” Pickard	45
Rev. James Cleveland	47
Herman Harris	50
Gino Vannelli	54
Quincy Jones	57
 3. THE WHITFIELD SOUND	 60
Redefining the Choral Sound	60

Blending Gospel, Jazz, and Classicism.....	71
Creating Symphonic Textures	84
Deepening Intimacy in Gospel Song Lyrics.....	87
Conclusions	93
4. SPHERE OF INFLUENCE.....	95
Fred Hammond	95
Byron Cage	96
Donald Lawrence	96
Earnest Pugh	97
Percy Bady	97
Darius Brooks	97
Cedric Dent	98
Richard Smallwood	98
Rick Robinson.....	99
Stanley Brown	99
Steven Ford	100
Tony Walker	100
Trent Phillips	100
Twinkie Clark	101
V. Michael McKay.....	101
Dr. Bobby Jones	102
Jonathan DuBose, Jr	102
CONCLUSIONS.....	103
APPENDIX A: SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY OF REFERENCED RECORDINGS.....	105
Bibliography	107
Biographical Sketch.....	109

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1. Thomas Whitfield and the Craig Brothers	12
Figure 1.2. Thomas Whitfield and Ronald Kirksey in the studio with Voices of Tabernacle.....	13
Figure 1.3. Thomas Whitfield with Brian Spears and Shirley Caesar at United Sound Studios.....	29
Figure 1.4. Whitfield with Al Jarreau at the recording session for Soulful Celebration	34
Figure 1.5. Whitfield and Tramaine Hawkins at the recording session for Soulful Celebration	34
Figure 1.6. Card of support from Whitfield to Gwen Morton	36
Figure 1.7. Thomas Whitfield's memorial service program.....	39
Figure 1.8. Letter from Whitfield to Kurt Carr, June 18, 1991	40
Figure 2.1. Alfred Bolden's memorial service program.....	43
Figure 2.2. Herman Harris and Thomas Whitfield	51

LIST OF MUSIC EXAMPLES

Example 2.1. “Wounded For Me” chorus.....	52
Example 3.1. “Down at the Cross,” mm. 59-63.....	62
Example 3.2. “With My Whole Heart,” mm. 9-11.....	63
Example 3.3. “With My Whole Heart,” mm. 6-8.....	64
Example 3.4. “Nothing But The Blood,” mm. 1-3.....	64
Example 3.5. “Alas! And Did My Savior Bleed”	73
Example 3.6. “Only a Look,” original hymn	74
Example 3.7. “Only a Look,” the gospel hymn arrangement	74
Example 3.8. “Down at the Cross” introit.....	75
Example 3.9. “Only a Look” introit.....	75
Example 3.10. “Down at the Cross,” mm. 22-31.....	76
Example 3.11. “Down at the Cross,” chorus excerpt, mm. 41-58	77
Example 3.12. “Only a Look,” chorus excerpt, mm. 38-54	78
Example. 3.13. “Down at the Cross,” vamp excerpt, mm. 85-93	79
Example 3.14. “Only a Look,” vamp excerpt.....	80
Example 3.15. “Oh, How I Love Jesus” refrain, mm. 1-5.....	81
Example 3.16. “Down at the Cross” ending.....	82
Example 3.17. Whitfield outro	82
Example 3.18. “Praise His Name” intro, mm. 1-8.....	82
Example 3.19. Whitfield shout.....	83

FOREWORD

The last time I heard Minister Thomas Anthony Whitfield was at an afternoon musical at a small church on the west side of Detroit in May of 1992. A month later his journey on this mortal side was over. I remember feeling that afternoon the same as I had felt more than a decade earlier when I first experienced the anointed genius who we would all come to refer to as “The Maestro.” Whitfield’s music, when presented by him, spoke directly to the soul in a musical language that was excitingly new and, at the same time, reassuringly inevitable. It was gospel music as we had never heard it before and yet, unequivocally, as it was meant to be. After each hearing I would, as did many of my colleagues, rush to a piano and try to replicate the inventive harmonic progressions and unique voicings that characterized his playing. It was, as Amy Fay described her attempts to imitate her teacher Carl Tausig, “like trying to recreate a streak of lightning with a wet match.” And, like a bolt of lightning tearing through a dark and monotonous musical landscape, he was gone before we could fully appreciate the illumination he shed on the road ahead.

In the mid ‘90s, as both a working musician and a young father, there were many times when my son, Brandon Waddles, accompanied me to rehearsals, services and concerts. The music of the Thomas Whitfield was often played in the car in route to these engagements or was part of the repertoire being taught or performed. Interestingly, at that time, the songs did not speak to him as powerfully as they did to me – at least not as powerfully as I wanted them to. In later years, as he began his own journey towards becoming a musician of uncommon perspicacity, we would occasionally discuss Whitfield’s music but never quite agreed regarding its ability to stir the spirit. Perhaps, in some ways, this music was ahead of its time even then. Over the years it has succeeded in seducing him as it did me many years before and I am very proud that Minister Whitfield has found such an accomplished and gifted champion in Brandon. We now share a mutual admiration

and respect for the Maestro's indelible role in gospel music history as an innovator and an icon. It is my hope that many others will come to appreciate the work and legacy of the Maestro through the research and information contained in the pages that follow.

In a relatively short span of time (38 years) Minister Whitfield left a tremendous amount of music to inspire and encourage the body of Christ. And while many of his songs are still unfamiliar to choirs beyond the Midwest (a travesty currently being rectified by the efforts of prolific transcribers like Brandon), his influence can be heard in the playing of musicians across the country. He had an insatiable thirst and appreciation for music of all genres and the ability to fuse them in a distinctive style that perfectly undergirded his often hymn-like lyrics. I've often wondered if Tommy, like Mozart and MLK, had a premonition of his own mortality that inspired him to be so prolific. Many of us who were blessed to work with him have, in the ensuing years, mused over what he would have accomplished if he had stayed with us longer. It seems like he had so much more to say. Perhaps his destiny was not to complete a cycle of growth but rather to provide the seeds of inspiration from which countless generations can grow and expand the reach of gospel music. And, in so doing, still he speaks from eternity.

Alvin Bernard Waddles

Detroit, Michigan, March 2019

ABSTRACT

This study details the historical relevance of Thomas Whitfield and his impact on contemporary gospel music. Through musical analysis, the document illustrates Whitfield's innovations within the genre. Interviews with those who knew him, worked with him, and were influenced by his work assist the investigation in both fleshing out his historical background, as well as support the case for his lasting impact on gospel music.

INTRODUCTION

Affectionately known as “Tommie,” and referred to as the “Maestro” by gospel music professionals, Thomas Whitfield should be considered the Dean of Contemporary Gospel Music. Bil Carpenter, a historian, wrote that as a composer “Thomas Whitfield is singularly responsible for marrying the uninhibited excitement of the Pentecostal music tradition with the controlled poise of the Baptist music tradition. And just to keep things interesting, Whitfield threw in a good measure of European classical music to define his unique choir blend.”¹ Whitfield’s work with his choir, known as the Thomas Whitfield Company, set a standard for contemporary gospel choirs. Together they created an unmistakable sound, exploring previously uncharted harmonic territory in gospel music and inspiring a host of choirmaster hopefuls to come. As a producer, Whitfield helped to elevate the careers of two of gospel music’s most beloved voices, Vanessa Bell Armstrong and Yolanda Adams, among countless others. His recorded work with the Company and others, as well as his solo efforts, serves as the benchmark for studio production standards in contemporary gospel music. Whitfield’s sudden passing in 1992 proved a tragic blow to the gospel music community. However, he left an indelible mark on the industry, and his distinctive sound is heard in all of gospel music today.

Need for the Study

In her article entitled “Gospel Music Research,” Mellonee Burnim stated that “we cannot assume that our active participation and involvement in this [gospel] tradition, no matter how extensive, is the single prerequisite to unfolding the complexities of the black gospel music tradition.” She concluded, “There is much that remains to be done.”² Indeed, while the scholarly

¹ Bil Carpenter, *Uncloudy Day: The Gospel Music Encyclopedia* (San Francisco: Hal Leonard Corporation, 2005), 437.

² Mellonee Burnim, “Gospel Music Research,” *Black Music Research Journal*, 1980, 1, 63-70.

study of black gospel music has witnessed a slow but steady surge since the genre's inception at the beginning of the twentieth century, such research has paled in comparison to that of other black music genres such as the spiritual, blues, and jazz. At the time of publication of Burnim's article, only a small number of books and articles concerning black gospel music existed. Tony Heilbut's book *The Gospel Sound*, as well as Horace Boyer's article on "Contemporary gospel music," were foundational in bringing attention to several prominent gospel writers and artists leading up to that time. Burnim noted that only five doctoral dissertations maintained a black gospel music focus, and hers would become the sixth. One of these dissertations, written by Irene Jackson while at Wesleyan University, focused on the work of gospel music pioneer Roberta Martin. Until now, no dissertation has focused specifically on the historical relevance and musical analysis of the works of an isolated composer/performer within the vein of contemporary gospel music. With the passing of pioneering contemporary gospel composers such as Andraé Crouch (2015), Walter (2010) and Edwin Hawkins (2018), and Thomas Whitfield, my hope is that this study will not only bring to light Whitfield's contributions to gospel music, but also encourage similar studies that will do the same for his aforementioned contemporaries, and those still living and able to tell their own stories.

Survey of Literature

Despite the significant acclamations bestowed upon him by gospel music professionals, there is a severely limited amount of research dedicated to Whitfield's life and work. It is imperative that Whitfield's story and legacy be fully immersed into scholarly conversation. To that end, there are four questions that lie at the heart of this dissertation:

- What historical background represents Thomas Whitfield's impact on gospel music?
- What people and experiences served as foundational influences on Whitfield and his work?
- What were the significant points of innovation that helped to define the Whitfield Sound?

- How has Whitfield's legacy impacted the gospel music community of today?

For this study, I have consulted both primary and secondary source materials. Primary sources include: (1) music recordings, (2) transcriptions, (3) newspaper articles, and (4) personal interviews and correspondences. Secondary source materials include books and dissertations related to Whitfield. The following methods were used during the course of this study: archival research, music analysis, oral history, reception history and criticism. In particular, the information gathered from the newspaper articles, personal interviews and correspondences with persons closely associated with Whitfield have provided first-hand accounts of experiences otherwise inaccessible due to his sudden passing.

This dissertation is inspired, in part, by a larger project I have been working on to create transcription-arrangements of the recorded music of Thomas Whitfield over the past 5-6 years.³ In my conversation with Company member and soloist Scott Bard-Mansur, he noted that shortly before his passing, Whitfield expressed a desire to have his music scored.⁴ In present day, with the assistance of Dr. James Abbington, editor of the African American Church Music Series of GIA Publications, Inc., I have created transcription-arrangements of several of Whitfield's most endearing compositions. These, along with a number of Whitfield transcriptions found in more recent hymnals, have been published by GIA. They are, to date, the first and only scored settings of his work. These scores both fuel the analysis of the Whitfield Sound and make his work more accessible to the larger musical audience.

³ I define the transcription-arrangement as a condensing of the original musical form to create an accessible setting that still maintains the integrity of the composer's intent.

⁴ Mansur went on to state that Whitfield said the only person he would entrust to do this was my father, Alvin Waddles.

Books Containing Reference to Whitfield

There are three books in particular that contain brief but informative entries dedicated to Whitfield. Bil Carpenter contributed the larger of the two in *Uncloudy Days: The Gospel Music Encyclopedia* (2005). Therein, Carpenter highlights some of Whitfield's earliest musical experiences, as well as his founding of the Company and subsequent successes with the choir. He goes on to list several of Whitfield's most prominent collaborations with artists including Rev. James Cleveland, Edwin Hawkins, and Aretha Franklin. The entry concludes with a discussion of several events surrounding Whitfield's passing, and the work of then Company president Donna Harris to maintain the legacy of Whitfield and the choir in the following years.

Emmett George Price and Tammy Kernodle, editors of the *Encyclopedia of African American Music* (2010), wrote about Whitfield less in a biographical sense than as a survey of his impact on contemporary gospel music. They speak of his innovation in gospel music production, along with "his recorded virtuosic displays on piano and organ [that] are just as influential for modern gospel enthusiasts and instrumentalists alike."⁵ The entry concludes with a brief listing of several gospel artists who have re-recorded Whitfield's songs.

Deborah Smith-Pollard, author of *When The Church Becomes Your Party: Contemporary Gospel Music* (2008), speaks to Whitfield's contribution to praise and worship music in the Black community. Pollard writes that songs such as "We Need a Word from the Lord" and "Lift Those Hands" were among the earliest of performed and recorded praise and worship songs, a term that during Whitfield's lifetime was largely unfamiliar to its core audience. The entry concludes with Whitfield being cited "as a forerunner in the genre for the Black community."⁶

⁵ Emmett G. Price III, Tammy L. Kernodle and Horace J. Maxile, Jr., *Encyclopedia of African American Music* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2011), 88.

⁶ Deborah Smith Pollard, *Contemporary Gospel Music: When the Church Becomes Your Party* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2008), 26.

Concerning scholarly research about Thomas Whitfield, there are two dissertation documents that up to this time are the most substantial in content. Raymond Wise's "Defining African American Gospel Music by Tracing its Historical and Musical Development from 1900 to 2000" is an extensive study examining the historical and musical development of African gospel music throughout the 20th century. In his chapter, "Emerging Trends in Gospel Music (1980s)", Wise writes of Whitfield as "[an] artist who was responsible for bringing jazz chords and harmonies to traditional and contemporary gospel music." Because of such witnessed in his work as a choirmaster with the Company and his collaboration as a producer for several landmark, Wise states that Whitfield's use of "contemporary jazz penetrated gospel music and forever changed the vocal and instrumental vocabulary."⁷

Birgitta Johnson's "Oh, For A Thousand Tongues to Sing: Music and Worship in African American Mega churches of Los Angeles, California" is an ethnographic account of African American sacred music performed in the worship services of African American mega-churches in Los Angeles. In her chapter, "Praise and Worship: Music, Movements, & Musical Intersections," Johnson includes a section detailing the contributions of African Americans to praise and worship in the Black community, calling specific attention to Andraé Crouch and Thomas Whitfield. She writes that "[Whitfield's] blending of Black Pentecostal and Baptist gospel traditions with classical influences opened the door for future gospel-classical hybrids in the future of Richard Smallwood, Donald Lawrence, and Kurt Carr." Johnson goes on to write that Whitfield pressed the boundaries of contemporary gospel further than Crouch, Edwin, and Walter Hawkins by way of his vocal and instrumental innovations in the genre.

⁷ Raymond Wise, "Defining African American Gospel Music by Tracing its Historical and Musical Development from 1900 to 2000" (Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 2002), 186-88.

Johnson's study also details Whitfield's work in introducing praise and worship music inside the Black gospel medium: "He...served as a model for contemporary gospel and urban praise and worship pioneers such as fellow Detroit native Fred Hammond, Ricky Dillard, and Kirk Franklin." She goes on to reference several of Whitfield's most enduring praise and worship classics, as well his use of recorded worship interludes. The entry also discusses his use of instrumentation to help define the Whitfield sound and speaks to Whitfield's placement of instrumental interludes on his recordings, a rarity in gospel music at that time. "For many," Johnson writes, "Whitfield's contributions represented innovations in composing and producing gospel music."⁸

The aforementioned books and dissertations assist in presenting Whitfield as an innovator in the realms of both contemporary gospel and praise and worship music. The writers represent the necessary communion of the scholar and practitioner as one, in an effort to bring to light the work of one of gospel music's most unsung voices.

Chapter Overview

- 1 Biography of the Maestro**
This chapter discusses Whitfield's historical background and overall relevance to the genre.
- 2 Influences on Whitfield**
This chapter discusses the musical figures that most impacted Whitfield's work.
- 3 The Whitfield Sound**
This chapter discusses the relevant elements that helped to define Whitfield's innovative sound.
- 4 Sphere of Influence**
This chapter summarizes Whitfield's impact on gospel music, as quoted by interviewees.
- 5 Conclusions**
This chapter summarizes the investigation of Whitfield's life and music.

⁸ Birgitta Joelisa Johnson, "Oh, for a Thousand Tongues to Sing: Music and Worship in African American Megachurches of Los Angeles, California" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2008), 290-96.

CHAPTER ONE

A BIOGRAPHY OF THE MAESTRO

Lisa Collins, founder and publisher of the *Gospel Music Industry Roundup*—often referred to as the “Bible of the Gospel music industry”—defined contemporary gospel music as being “‘Good news’ music using secular influences but designed for worship within and beyond the walls of the traditional church.”⁹ Dr. Charrise Barron defined the subgenre as gospel music that is being influenced by and in conversation with the black popular music of the day, including R&B, hip-hop, soul and jazz.¹⁰ Barron preceded this definition by explaining that the beginnings of contemporary gospel music dealt with the concept of migration, just as gospel music had done in its earlier stages. However, while early/traditional gospel music was concerned with migration on a geographical scale, contemporary gospel music was connected to what Barron described as a migration across market lines.

While black gospel music pioneers such as the Father of Gospel Music, Thomas Dorsey, and the often proclaimed King of Gospel Music, James Cleveland, did much to further the reach of the genre within black church denominations across the country, several new composers of gospel music arrived on the scene, migrating across market lines and reaching outside of the four walls of the church. Throughout the second half of the 20th century, Edwin and Walter Hawkins, Andraé Crouch, and Thomas Whitfield helped to change the sound of gospel music, defining the contemporary. Thomas Whitfield, arguably more so than any of his contemporaries, left a lasting

⁹ Lisa Collins, *The gospel music industry roundup 2002*, (2001): 7.

¹⁰ Dr. Barron is a postdoctoral associate at the Yale Institute of Sacred Music. Apollo Live Wire, Apollo Theatre. *How I Got Over: The Spirit of Gospel Music*. Livestream, 1:39:56.
<https://livestream.com/accounts/2535196/Apollolivewire/videos/167075222>

mark on the industry, creating an unmistakable aural aesthetic known as the “Whitfield Sound.” His legacy influenced singers, instrumentalists, songwriters and producers alike for decades to come.

The Foundation

Thomas Anthony Whitfield was born in Detroit, MI, to Thomas Henry and Jacqueline Lillian Whitfield on April 30, 1954. He was the eldest of five brothers.¹¹ “The whole family’s into music,” recalled Whitfield, “and my grandmother had me in church every time I turned around.” While his mother Jacqueline was a pianist and vocalist, Whitfield credited his grandmother Mabel Ingram with urging him to play the piano, inspiring him to take lessons at the age of five.¹² “My grandmother worked for a couple, Mr. and Mrs. Myron Greenfield, and they paid for my piano lessons because she couldn’t afford them.”¹³ His teacher Mrs. Lela Greene was an accomplished concert pianist in the Detroit area. This period of tutelage was short-lived, however, as he quickly developed his extraordinary gift. Thomas was reared in the Detroit Public School System, attending Alger Elementary School and Sherrard Jr. High School. He also attended Central High School but dropped out as his musical career began to take off. Whitfield received his first recording contract as a teen with Stax Records.¹⁴ Larry, his youngest brother, recalled his early work with Stax:

I remember, as a child, we stayed on...Princeton, between Fenkell and John C. Lodge. I remember a limousine picking Tommy up and taking him to Wattstax. Wattstax was this big event where you had all the stars of that day all come together and do this big concert. It was like Woodstock. WattStax was the black version of Woodstock. And Tommy played for Parliament Funkadelic. He played piano for them.¹⁵

¹¹ David, Larry, Robert and John were his younger brothers. Robert preceded him in death.

¹² Larry, his youngest brother, reports that this grandmother was in fact his great-aunt, Ma Mabel. Thomas even lived with her for a time at her home on Holbrook.

¹³ Joyce Walker-Tyson, “The Whitfield sound is soaring high in heavenly music,” *Detroit Free Press*, September 14, 1981, 8F.

¹⁴ Reportedly an album was produced but never released by the record company.

¹⁵ Larry Whitfield, in discussion with the author, December 2017. All subsequent quotes from Whitfield are from this interview.

Whitfield's musical experiences with Stax Records and Parliament Funkadelic proved to be among the founding influences for his earliest work with the Whitfield Company. Even more significant, perhaps, was his work at Our Faith Prayer Tabernacle.

By the time Thomas Whitfield reached Prayer Tabernacle in 1970, Detroit was a city poised to become the new gospel music capital.¹⁶ An observer, Charles Clency stated that "Detroit came to Chicago and that changed everybody. That changed gospel music, period."¹⁷ Rev. Charles Ashley Craig II, before founding Prayer Tabernacle, was the Minister of Music at Church Of Our Prayer, under the pastorate of Rev. James Lofton. Church Of Our Prayer was the preeminent site for the development of gospel music in Detroit. When Craig left Church Of Our Prayer to found Prayer Tabernacle, he hired a young Rev. James Cleveland to become Minister of Music at the new church. Detroit music luminary, Dorgan Needom, recalls that the gospel music sung during Craig's tenure at Church Of Our Prayer was different than the gospel music embraced at Prayer Tabernacle.

[Craig] was more contemporary. Church Of Our Prayer [had] a big choir sound, and they were doing a lot of the Sallie Martin/Kenneth Morris songs that were coming out of Chicago. That's what they were doing. When [Craig] got to Our Faith Prayer Tabernacle, he was doing more contemporary music...contemporary for that time.¹⁸

Together, Charles Craig and James Cleveland formed the choir at Prayer Tabernacle, aptly named the Voices of Tabernacle. Along with premier musicians Alfred Bolden and Herbert Pickard, this trailblazing musical aggregation would carry the mantle for the development of gospel music previously held by Church Of Our Prayer, producing some of Cleveland's earliest recordings and cementing Prayer Tabernacle's reputation as a gospel music mecca in the city of Detroit. It was not long before many, including a young Thomas Whitfield, took notice.

¹⁶ Chicago is generally referred to as the birthplace of Black gospel music.

¹⁷ Robert M. Marovich, *A City Called Heaven: Chicago and the Birth of Gospel* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 260.

¹⁸ Dorgan Needom in discussion with the author, December 2017. All subsequent quotes from Needom are from this interview.

Whitfield's first official church appointment was at the Nazarene Baptist Church in 1964, where he became the church's organist at the age of 10. Dorgan Needom recalls first meeting Whitfield during that time. "Tommy was playing at the Nazarene Baptist Church on the east side. The girl that was the pastor's daughter brought him into Elma and Carl's House of Music. The first time she brought him there, she said, 'I want you to hear this fabulous musician we've got.' He was phenomenal." His playing must have also caught the attention of Elma Lois Hendrix Parham, founder and owner of the House of Music on Owen St.¹⁹ Parham not only ran her own music publishing company there but sold records as well. In addition to contracting Whitfield to teach piano lessons at the House of Music, she brought him over to assist the music ministry at her church, Greater New Mt. Moriah Baptist Church. As a member of the church, Parham had organized the women's and men's choirs, as well as the Inspirational Choir. Whitfield played there from time to time, and even sang in the church choir.

Whitfield's playing also caught the attention of local singer/organizer Timothy Hurd. Hurd was a close friend of the innovative Detroit musician Beverly Glenn, who had most recently formed the Beverly Glenn Concert Chorale while a student at Wayne State University. "Tommy was no more than about 14 years old when I met him," Glenn remembers. "He was playing the organ. When I heard Tommy play, I just couldn't believe it."²⁰ It was not long after this meeting that Whitfield began playing for and touring with the Concert Chorale. Beverly Glenn served as an early musical mentor for Whitfield, even teaching him how to write a song. Glenn recalls the experience:

One night, we were just talking to each other on the telephone. [Tommy] was asking me about how to write a song. I explained it to the best of my ability...I said, 'Always try to keep a tape recorder handy if you can. And keep paper and pencil near your bed.' A lot of times, inspiration to write a song...it comes to me sometimes in the wee hours of the morning. You never know when the inspiration's going to come. Sometimes I get the lyrics

¹⁹ Parham was known during the 1960s and 1970s as part of the Big Three, along with Mattie Moss Clark and Lucille Lemon. All three were pioneering women in the history of Detroit gospel music.

²⁰ Beverly Glenn, in discussion with the author, August 2018.

at the same time that I get the melody. Sometimes I can hear all the chords. I can hear the strings. I can hear the horns...I can hear all of that going through my head at one time.

Later that same night, Thomas Whitfield called Glenn excitedly, beckoning her to come to Ma Mabel's home where he was staying. He had written his first original song. "He Shall Redeem" was recorded on Glenn's first album with the Concert Chorale, *Coming Again So Soon* (1969). It was his first recorded composition.²¹ "I was the very first artist, ever, to record any of Tommy's music," Glenn exclaimed. "And I was the first one that mentored him about how to write songs. And that same night he came forth with his first song! That was pretty amazing."

Although Whitfield grew up in the Baptist church, it was his foray into the world of Black Pentecostalism that propelled him to success. The Detroit Free Press noted,

In the late 1960s, Prayer Tabernacle Church was the place to go for gospel on a Sunday night. It was about 1969 when Mr. Whitfield, a student at Central High School, started coming around the church. The Craig Brothers, a gospel duo, heard him playing the organ.²²

Not long after hearing him, Whitfield was recruited to play the organ for the Voices of Tabernacle, collaborating with the Craig Brothers just as Rev. Cleveland had done with the Craigs' father over a decade earlier (Fig. 1.1). Sande Rose, a longtime member at Prayer Tabernacle, was like a younger sibling to Whitfield and the Craig Brothers and recalled their working relationship at Prayer Tabernacle:²³

Tommy and the Craig Brothers...they were great friends. It was a team. That's when I first realized what a team was. Porky and Lenzy sang. If you listen to all of the Prayer Tabernacle records, most of the [lead singing] on there is just Porky and Lenzy, and the choir did the background vocals. They were so smart. I attribute this to Tommy. He would pitch a lot of our songs really, really high. You wouldn't know that there weren't 78 people in there singing...and there really weren't.²⁴

²¹ Another Whitfield composition, *God Is Righteous*, was recorded on Glenn's second project, "Just Believe."

²² Dori J. Maynard, "Singer loved modern gospel," *Detroit Free Press*, June 22, 1992, 2B.

²³ Sande Rose, historian for the Gospel Music Workshop of America and longtime member of Prayer Tabernacle, stated that Minister Keith Pringle brought Tommy to Prayer Tabernacle around 1969/70. The Craig Brothers, James Lenzy & Charles III were the sons of Rev. C.A. Craig. They were often referred to as "Lenzy" and "Porky," respectively. By this time, Rev. C.A. Craig had passed (1968), and his brother Rev. David K. Craig was installed as pastor of Prayer Tabernacle. Rev. James Cleveland had left the church to pursue what would become a historic career in gospel music, substantiating his title as the King of Gospel Music.

²⁴ Sande Rose, in discussion with the author, December 2017.



Figure 1.1. Thomas Whitfield and the Craig Brothers. Photograph courtesy of Sande Rose.

The music ministry at Prayer Tabernacle continued to thrive under the new leadership of Thomas Whitfield and the Craig Brothers during the 1970s. All three were undoubtedly heavily influenced by the sounds of the time. “Every year, [Voices of Tabernacle] would have concerts at the Ford Auditorium...we would have a contemporary half,” Sande recalled.

We would do songs like *Where Is the Love*, by Donnie and Roberta. They would switch the words around. They just collaborated...the Craigs and Tommy. That’s where they started, then they started to blossom more into writing. But first, they were taking things and rearranging them...gospelizing them. If you listen to some of the old Prayer Tabernacle recordings...a lot of the newer stuff...Tommy had a great influence on that.

Whitfield produced and recorded several albums during his tenure with the Voices of Tabernacle (Fig. 1.2). Arguably the most notable of these was the 1975 recording *God Has Smiled On Me*, an album Rev. Cleveland returned to Detroit to record with the choir. Whitfield penned the last track, “Make Me Over Again,” as a duet for the Craig Brothers. The song is not only a testament to Whitfield’s prodigious technique as a pianist but also his gift for fusing the religious fervor of Pentecostalism with the harmonic progressions of jazz, soul and other more secular idioms.

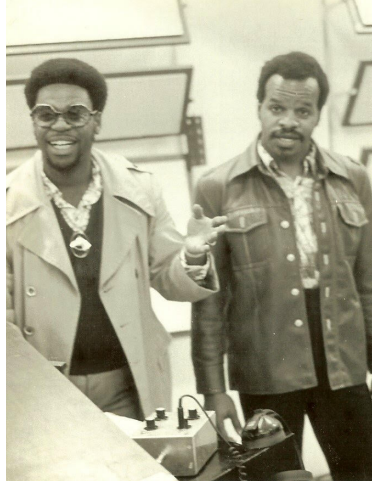


Figure 1.2. Thomas Whitfield and Ronald Kirksey in the studio with Voices of Tabernacle. Photograph courtesy of Sande Rose.

Whitfield and the Craig Brothers continued to experiment and evolve this concept even more so on later recordings with the Voices. “He’s Alright,” a selection from the *Hear Our Prayer* recording in 1977, is a churchy take on Stevie Wonder’s funk hit, “I Wish.” Whitfield was just as comfortable using Western classical influences as well. The titular track of the 1975 Voices recording, *The Promise of God*, is proof of such.²⁵ The anthemic piece is reminiscent of the traditional “Let Mt. Zion Rejoice,” yet infused with the more contemporary influences of soul and jazz.²⁶ Whitfield’s work with the Beverly Glenn Concert Chorale, as well as his time at Prayer Tabernacle as a pianist, organist, writer, arranger, and producer, proved foundational for arguably his most significant contribution to the world of gospel music: his Company.

The Company

Whitfield met and collaborated with a number of people while at Prayer Tabernacle who proved crucial to the development of the Company. One name that stood out from among them

²⁵ Titular – denoting a person or thing from whom or which the name of an artistic work or similar is taken.

²⁶ “Let Mt. Zion Rejoice” is an often-performed anthem within Black church culture.

was Tyrone J. Hemphill. T.J., at the time an organist and Minister of Music at Zion Hope Baptist Church, was urged by Beverly Glenn to take organ lessons with Whitfield. “[Thomas] was 17, and I was around 22 at the time,” said Hemphill. For several months he visited Prayer Tabernacle to hear Whitfield play. “The first time I heard him play,” Hemphill recalled, “it just blew me away. His chord structures and movements were just the most incredible I’d heard in gospel music.” After a brief stint taking lessons with Whitfield, Hemphill approached him about forming a choir.²⁷ While initially tense about leaving the church to form his own group, Whitfield eventually embraced the idea.²⁸ Hemphill recalled the initial conversation with Whitfield about naming the group:

[Tommy] said, ‘I’ve got a name...we’ll call it the Hemphill-Whitfield Chorale.’ I told him, ‘Nope, I’ve already got the name picked out...the name...is the Thomas Whitfield Company. Nobody’s had this name...a Company.’²⁹

Whitfield left Prayer Tabernacle in 1977 to form his choir. Several of the founding members of the Company sang with him at Prayer Tabernacle and elsewhere.³⁰ Minister Michael Fletcher recalls being approached by Whitfield to join the ensemble:³¹

He asked me whether I wanted to be a member of it. And I, without hesitation, told him, ‘Yes, I’d be glad to.’ I wanted to be a part of a choir that was at the ground level, where if they were to succeed, I’d be able to say I was a part of that achievement. And I was there at the ground level.³²

The ground level began at Hemphill’s church, Zion Hope Baptist Church, on Saturday, January 29, 1977, when the Company held its first rehearsal. The Company’s first booked engagement took

²⁷ T.J. is generally credited as co-founder of the Whitfield Company. He designed the logo, and served as the Company’s first choir director.

²⁸ Phyliss Lyons in discussion with the author, January 2018.

²⁹ T.J. Hemphill in discussion with the author, December 2017. All subsequent quotes from Hemphill are from this interview.

³⁰ Before forming the Company, Whitfield had created two smaller groups. The earlier group, called the Gentlemen 4, included Larry Edwards, longstanding member and regular soloist with the Company. The latter included Whitfield, his brother David, Phyliss Lyons, brothers Sam and Jerome Joe, and Karen Osborne. Phyliss, David and Karen were founding members of the Company. Sam and Jerome were two of the Company’s first musicians.

³¹ Fletcher, founding member of the Company, was one of its longstanding choir directors, and musical liaison to Thomas Whitfield. His own ensemble, the Michael Fletcher Chorale, was directly inspired by his work with Whitfield.

³² Michael Fletcher in discussion with the author, December 2017.

place at the Book-Cadillac Hotel on Friday, April 8, 1977, and the premiere concert in the McGregor Auditorium at Wayne State University on Sunday, June 5, 1977.³³ Michael Fletcher recalled the experience:

I'll never forget. Tommy played "Only What You Do For Christ Will Last" on the organ that night. Frank White was there.³⁴ Frank White said he knew Tommy must have had four or five extra fingers. Everyone knew Alfred Bolden, at the time, was the only one to really play that song. Tommy played it that night. . . Frank White got up and ran through McGregor Auditorium! Believe you me. He said he could not take it. He said, 'Can't nobody play like that.'

While numbers were still relatively small at these first performances, the choir would in time grow in size to nearly fifty singers. The sound that developed from the almost organic fusion of Whitfield's playing and their singing would become the defining standard of gospel choir music during the next decade. Carpenter writes this of the Company and Whitfield's compositional style:

[The Company] comprised 40 of the most renowned soloists, music directors, and musicians around Detroit. Whitfield crafted his own unique contemporary gospel style that merged elements of the Baptist, Pentecostal, and classical music genres.³⁵

Whitfield's innovations with the Company were no doubt inspired by his tenures with the Beverly Glenn Concert Chorale and Prayer Tabernacle. However, it was the combination of these experiences and the benefit of having high-quality musicians at his disposal that gave him the freedom to move in a completely new direction with the Company. He took full advantage of the opportunity, handpicking select voices from around the city to create his innovative aural concept.

Larry Whitfield recalled the audition process Thomas put in place for the singers:

The way Tommy would audition them. . . he would have them sing a song. The other part of the audition was ear testing. Tommy would play a chord, and in that chord he would want them to sing the middle note. He would change it up and put weird chords in there. Because of the music he was doing, they needed to have an ear. And they could not look at his hands. They would have to sing the middle note that they heard.

³³ The engagement was a Good Friday service, held annually at the Book-Cadillac Hotel by the late Bertha Harris.

³⁴ Frank White, an early mentor of Thomas Whitfield, was the long-time organist at St. Stephen A.M.E. Church in Detroit. A premiere, classically trained church musician, he grew a great affinity for gospel music.

³⁵ Carpenter, 437.

The rehearsals proved to be no less arduous and were predominantly closed to the public. Whitfield often did not even allow his instrumentalists to attend rehearsals until just before an event. He was highly protective of his singers, many of whom were much younger than he. Michael Fletcher, for one, was still in high school when he joined the Company. He remembered the weekly Saturday evening rehearsals that regularly lasted for hours on end:

Tommy's Company rehearsals were more like a service. I mean, he did the technical things...vocalises and whatnot. We sang anthems, spirituals, gospels and hymns...all of those. He did breathing exercises and the like. It was very thorough, and he was a no-nonsense guy. He exuded excellence, and he demanded excellence without excuse. After the vocal rehearsal, he would lead us into a worship, exalting the Lord. We would leave those [Saturday] rehearsals with something still left in us on Sunday morning. I think all of our churches benefited from a Saturday night rehearsal with the Maestro.

It was not long before his work with the Company caught the attention of Armen Boladian of Sound of Gospel.³⁶ Rudolph Stanfield, Jr., arguably Whitfield's most treasured protégée, recalled being with him for the meeting with Boladian at the Beef Carver's restaurant.³⁷ Armen reportedly handed Thomas a contract that "looked about 30 pages long." The year was 1978—Whitfield was 24 and Stanfield was 17. After flipping through about two pages, Whitfield looked at Stanfield and asked, "Do you think I should sign this or not? What do you think I should do?" Stanfield replied, "Well, might as well. What else we got to do for the next five years?" Whitfield signed the contract and handed it over to Boladian.³⁸ Whitfield signed on with SoG in 1978, kicking off the recording careers of the Company, Michael Fletcher, Yolanda Adams, Vanessa Bell Armstrong, and many others. The Company, in particular, would remain with the SoG label for over a decade, recording several trailblazing albums.

The Company's debut album, *Brand New*, was released in 1978, just a year after the birth of the ensemble. The album is an early testament to the clear departure Whitfield and his choir were

³⁶ Sound of Gospel is a local Detroit gospel music subsidiary of Westbound Records.

³⁷ Rudolph Stanfield, Jr., or "Rudy," took over for Whitfield at Prayer Tabernacle for a time, after his leaving in 1977.

³⁸ Rudolph Stanfield, in discussion with the author, December 2017.

making from the more classic sounds of gospel choir music found in Detroit in the 1950s and '60s.³⁹ The Company's sound was massive but always well-blended—a miracle, indeed, considering not only the vast array of distinct voices within the choir at any given time but also the high tessitura in which Whitfield often wrote for the group. More importantly, his extension of choral harmonies made for a sound not previously heard in gospel music. Dorgan Needom said that Whitfield “broke all the traditional rules of harmony” within gospel music at the time. Twinkie Clark and Richard Smallwood, among others, have both credited him with being the first to utilize jazz harmonies in gospel music.⁴⁰ This, combined with Whitfield's driving rhythm sections, bolstered by his passion for various genres of music, was all led by his prodigious keyboard skills. It is interesting to note, however, that not everyone was prepared for such innovation. Dr. Deborah Smith Pollard, a celebrated radio announcer and gospel music historian, spoke about her earliest experiences with Whitfield's music:

As I became a researcher, I had to ask myself...*Did we catch up with Tommy, or...What happened there?* When I would listen to musicians talk, they would say...*He's not playing what the choir is singing.* And that used to freak some people out. For some people, it may have been disconcerting. When talking to [Cedric Dent], he would talk about how that wasn't always what people were used to hearing. It was a little unsettling for some of them.⁴¹

While some may have been initially disapproving of his music, there was indeed an abundance of budding musicians who celebrated this newness of sound in gospel music. This collection of innovative musical qualities would characterize the work of Whitfield and the Company through the end of the '70s with a two-volume set of albums, *Things That We Believe, Vol. 1 & 2*. Whitfield's work in the 1980s, however, lifted him to an even higher sphere of influence with the Company and beyond.

³⁹ Predecessors such as Dr. Mattie Moss-Clark, Donald Vails, Rev. Charles Nicks and Rev. James Cleveland were hailed as creating a more sophisticated style of traditional gospel music in Detroit with their respective choirs.

⁴⁰ Ms. Clark and Mr. Smallwood were contemporaries of Whitfield, and are considered living legends of gospel music, particularly for their work in developing the contemporary sound.

⁴¹ Dr. Deborah Smith Pollard, in discussion with the author, December 2017.

The Master Producer

By the end of the 1970s Thomas Whitfield helped to successfully extend the legacy created by Bishop Craig and Rev. Cleveland at Prayer Tabernacle. His work as a pianist/organist, writer, and producer undoubtedly caught the attention of musicians around the city, as well as that of James Cleveland, whose work was receiving national acclaim. Also, Whitfield and his Company were on contract with Sound of Gospel, the premiere gospel record label in Detroit, spouting such talents as the Voices of Tabernacle, Clark Sisters, Donald Vails and the Choraleers, and Rev. Charles Nicks and the St. James Adult Choir. These successes, however, were coupled with several downfalls.

T.J. Hemphill, the co-founder of the Whitfield Company, was saved in the Apostolic Church in 1977 and resigned from the Company shortly after their first concert. “Literally, in a pseudo-spiritual way, [the church] forced me to leave the group,” Hemphill recalled. “I made one of the biggest mistakes of my life in leaving the group. Thomas was very upset, but he understood.” Hemphill and Whitfield had become very close friends since their first meeting and remained so over the years. The closeness of their relationship proved most beneficial as Whitfield suffered an even more tragic loss when Robert, one of his younger brothers, was shot and killed. He was 19. Hemphill remembers getting the call from Whitfield:

Man, he was just in tears. I started praying for him, right on the phone. And I had always spoken to Thomas about the Holy Spirit. And in the midst of that prayer, I just began to tell him, ‘Man, come on. Just worship. Just say *Hallelujah*.’ Tommy began to worship and praise. All I can tell you, brother...at one point during that prayer, he dropped the phone and you could hear him speaking clearly in tongues. Running around the house, speaking in tongues. That was his initial ascent into the Holy Spirit. It changed his life. God took him to a whole ‘nother level.

This event shifted Whitfield’s life both spiritually and musically. He began to attend Bible classes and services at a predominantly white church, Bethesda Christian Church. This worship experience transitioned Whitfield’s music—especially in terms of the lyrics—outside of the realm of traditional Black church rhetoric. Not long after Robert’s death, Whitfield went into Company

rehearsal invoking an unusually high spirit of worship. He introduced a new composition during the rehearsal—a song with all of two words: Hallelujah, Anyhow. In 1983 Thomas Whitfield & Company released their first live recording session—an album entitled *Hallelujah Anyhow*.⁴² The title track was considered Whitfield’s first major hit, and the album stayed on Billboard’s Gospel Music charts for over a year. This album and a selection entitled “Sacrifices of Praise” may well be considered some of the earliest in the Black praise and worship genre.

Around this time, Whitfield signed as a solo artist with Onyx International Records.⁴³ His debut solo project, *Hold Me*, has been hailed by many in the industry as a hallmark in the new era of contemporary gospel production. Whitfield is often credited as one of the first to utilize synthesizers in gospel music production which enabled him to create a new array of sounds within the genre.⁴⁴ Using these, in addition to a select group of singers from the Company, Whitfield was able to exert the full breadth of his musical genius into this project. Songs such as “Psalms,” “He Gave His All,” and “Hold Me” showcased his brilliance in being able to create an almost symphonic texture in the studio.

The soloist on one of the tracks from *Hold Me*, a selection entitled “I’ll See You In The Morning,” was Gwen Morton. Her sister-in-law, Denise Morton, was already a part of the Company, and had invited Whitfield to do a concert in New Orleans, Louisiana with their family, which included Bishop Paul S. Morton. After the concert, Whitfield asked Gwen to join the small group for his solo project. Thomas found the voice for which he had been searching to solo on “I’ll See

⁴² The recording session took place at the New St. Paul Tabernacle Church of God in Christ. Whitfield worked here for a time after leaving Prayer Tabernacle.

⁴³ Onyx is a black gospel subsidiary of Benson Records. Onyx, created by the late Gentry McCreary, signed and released some of the earliest albums of Richard Smallwood, Vanessa Bell Armstrong and Bishop Paul S. Morton, among others. Whitfield helped produce all three of these artists’ albums with Onyx.

⁴⁴ Michael Mindingall, a Whitfield mentee, reports that Whitfield was inspired by keyboardist Daniel Hawkins, brother of Edwin and Walter, to start using the Yamaha CP-80.

You In The Morning.” She became the muse to inspire some of the most treasured compositions from his pen and his future fiancée.

The 1980s proved to be a pivotal decade for Thomas Whitfield. Alongside his work with the Company and his solo project, Whitfield jumpstarted the recording careers of some of gospel music’s most celebrated artists. While doing so, he cemented his reputation as the “Master Producer,” further developing the sound of contemporary gospel music.

Vanessa Bell Armstrong

Detroit native Vanessa Bell Armstrong had grown quite a following as an oft-recorded soloist on albums with the Southwest Michigan State Choir, directed by Dr. Mattie Moss Clark, a towering figure in gospel music within the realm of the Church of God in Christ (C.O.G.I.C.). Dr. Clark as International President of the C.O.G.I.C. Music Department, was a founding influence upon the careers of Armstrong, Walter and Edwin Hawkins, Rev. James Moore, and of course, her daughters, the Clark Sisters, among others. “Mattie taught us to give it all that we had, cause we might not get another chance,” recalled Armstrong. Dr. Clark’s words of encouragement proved most instrumental when the 27-year-old Vanessa Bell Armstrong sang an impromptu rendering of “He Looked Beyond My Faults, And Saw My Need” at the 1981 national convening of the Gospel Music Workshop of America.⁴⁵ “When we got back from L.A., my phone was ringing off the hook. Every record company you could think of was calling, asking if I’d sign with them.”

Armstrong had a close friend who was married to Gentry McCreary of Onyx Records and decided to sign with the label. Upon signing with Onyx, the decision was made to elect Walter Hawkins as producer for her debut solo album. Vanessa traveled to California to begin recording

⁴⁵ The Gospel Music Workshop of America (GMWA), was founded by Rev. James Cleveland in Detroit, in 1968. The historic organization was the dream work of Bishop Charles Craig. Craig passed that same year of a heart attack. He was 39.

what would be known as the *Following Jesus* album. Around this time, however, Andraé Crouch had produced an album for another up and coming solo artist, Kristle Murden.⁴⁶ Crouch and Murden signed with Light Records, of which McCreary had previously been Director of Radio Promotions. The album *I Almost Let Go* was almost immediately shelved. “It was so contemporary that it got lost,” recalled Armstrong. “They didn’t know how to market it, and it wasn’t getting played. They weren’t doing that back then.”

Gentry McCreary and Onyx became concerned and began to look for a producer who could fuse traditional church style with a contemporary flavor. “They came up with Thomas Whitfield,” said Armstrong. The *Following Jesus* project was temporarily shelved, and Whitfield and Armstrong went to work on a new album.⁴⁷ Armstrong recalled the genius of Whitfield’s work in the studio:

Thomas had sleep apnea. I would look over there, and he’d be sleep all the time. But he would wake up...either he’d heard something that was dead wrong, or dead good! He gave me more room to do me. The thing that was so funny was before we would do the song, he’d say, “Come here, Van. This is the vamp. Let me hear the highest note you can sing, so I can get your key.” I’d sing it for him. “Okay, that’s all I need.” I wouldn’t hear of it any more until we got into the studio. When we got into the studio, the music and the backgrounds [were already there]...he already knew what I was going to do with the song.⁴⁸

Brian Spears, who served as Whitfield’s last manager, recalled that Thomas completed much of the pre-production work for this album and others at home. “He could hear a song, almost in its completed state, in his head. Thomas would play me a song he was thinking about recording, and he would be able to play the string and horn parts at the same time! It was amazing.”⁴⁹ Armstrong recorded her vocals for the entire album in one night.

Armstrong’s project *Peace Be Still* was released in 1983. The titular track, an ingenious re-imagining of Rev. James Cleveland’s original composition, became so successful that Cleveland did

⁴⁶ Andraé Crouch, a pivotal figure in the development of contemporary gospel music and contemporary Christian music, utilized Kristle Murden as a special guest soloist with his legendary group, the Disciples.

⁴⁷ *Following Jesus* was finally released in 1986, after Armstrong’s sophomore album, *Chosen*.

⁴⁸ Vanessa Bell Armstrong, in discussion with the author, January 2018.

⁴⁹ Brian Spears, in discussion with the author, August 2018. All subsequent quotes by Spears are from this interview.

away with his own and used Whitfield's arrangement.⁵⁰ The album would bring Whitfield his first of three GRAMMY nominations for Producer of the Year. Armstrong's sophomore album, *Chosen*, was released in 1984. The album featured the now classic contemporary gospel ballad "Nobody But Jesus," as well as another soul-stirring traditional tune. Its composer, Andre Woods, was a close friend and mentee of Whitfield. "Woods, here we go again," said Whitfield. "This project needs a plain song. I need something with just Vanessa's voice and piano." Woods had been working on a song extending from a series of sermons on faith he had been preaching. The song was "Faith That Conquers."⁵¹ This song, along with "Nobody But Jesus," would help propel Armstrong and *Chosen* to number one on the Billboard Top Gospel Albums chart. These two albums, produced by Whitfield, secured Vanessa Bell Armstrong's place as a leading and influential vocalist in the development of contemporary gospel music.

Keith Pringle

By the time Whitfield and Keith Pringle released 1984's landmark album *Perfect Peace*, Pringle had already established national acclaim with the forming of his Pentecostal Community Choir in 1979. Hit songs such as "Call Him Up" and "When All God's Children Get Together" elevated the prominence of the choir leader who started his career touring with Rev. James Cleveland.⁵²

While Pringle had released his debut solo album, *I Feel Like Going On*, with Hope Song in 1981, it was his collaboration with Whitfield that cemented his status as a solo artist. *Perfect Peace*'s title track, from the pen of Rudolph Stanfield, has become a standard in the gospel repertory, covered by artists like Marvin Sapp and Tonex. This track, along with Whitfield classics such as

⁵⁰ Cleveland recorded the song in 1962 with Lawrence Robert's First Baptist Church Choir in Nutley, New Jersey. The success elevated his career to gospel stardom.

⁵¹ Andre Woods, in discussion with the author, January 2018.

⁵² Pringle, a Detroit native, grew up at Prayer Tabernacle during Cleveland's tenure. In the 70's, he followed Cleveland to Los Angeles, where Cleveland pastored Cornerstone Institutional Baptist Church.

“With My Whole Heart” and “Don’t Give Up On Jesus,” kept the album on the Billboard Top Spirituals Chart for more than a year.

Bishop Paul Morton

Canadian born Paul S. Morton was born into a large musical family; he was one of nine siblings. “We were all singers,” said Morton. “Me and my brothers had a group called the Morton Brothers, and me and my sisters had another group called the Zionettes.” Denise Morton, his sister-in-law, connected the Morton family to Whitfield.⁵³ After collaborating on a concert with the family in New Orleans, Whitfield approached Paul about working on a solo album. Morton recalled witnessing Whitfield’s genius in the studio:

It was such a great experience for me, because he was such a professional in what he did. I would watch him, sometimes. We’d be there [in the studio] till the wee hours of the morning. He would even fall asleep sometimes, working the buttons. And soon as something went wrong, he would wake right up and straighten it out. He just had an ear for music. He was the Maestro. One of the most gifted people I’ve ever met in my life. For him to be able to produce my first major project was amazing to me. That put me on the map.⁵⁴

The 1985 Onyx release *Jesus, When Troubles Burden Me Down* proved to be yet another example of Whitfield’s ability to fuse the traditional with his unmistakable contemporary sound. Highlights include the hauntingly beautiful original tune “The Story of Calvary,” as well as Whitfield’s original arrangement of the popular hymn “Nothing But the Blood.”⁵⁵ Upon listening to *We Need the Lord*, one can even hear the backing vocals of a then young and up-and-coming contemporary gospel male group out of Detroit, Commissioned.⁵⁶

⁵³ Denise, who was married to James Morton, was already a member of the Whitfield Company.

⁵⁴ Bishop Paul S. Morton, in discussion with the author, August 2018.

⁵⁵ Whitfield revamped and re-recorded the same arrangement on *Alive and Satisfied*. An up-tempo setting of the same hymn was recorded on *And...They Sang...a Hymn*.

⁵⁶ Commissioned, inspired by the work of The Winans, were crucial in implementing the new style of urban contemporary gospel music. Fred Hammond, credited as the architect behind Urban Praise & Worship, was one of the group’s founding members.

Yolanda Adams

Before meeting Thomas Whitfield, Yolanda Adams was already a lead soloist with the Houston-based recording ensemble, the Southeast Inspirational Choir. Unbeknownst to Adams, three friends of hers, the late O'Landa Draper, Kenneth Grant, and Bishop Paul Morton, informed Whitfield of the then 23-year-old schoolteacher singing with the choir. Soon after, the Southeast Inspirational Choir invited Whitfield to take part in their anniversary concert as a special guest. "He was actually there to hear another young lady," Adams recalled.⁵⁷ "Someone had been talking to him about signing her." Upon hearing Yolanda, however, Whitfield's mind was almost immediately made up. "I sang a song called 'Wash Me'," said Adams. "It brought him to tears."

After the concert, Whitfield approached Adams. "Young lady, you are anointed. Everything everybody said about you is true." They met the next day and Whitfield told her that while he was initially there to sign someone else, he could not leave without offering her an opportunity to sign with Sound of Gospel.

Adams recorded in Detroit during the winter of 1986, laying down her vocal tracks on two separate occasions during school breaks. She and Whitfield even co-wrote several songs. "That is really where I was encouraged to write for myself," Adams remembered. "He gave me confidence to write." Whitfield admired the conversational texture and the realism of Adams's writing and continued to urge the necessity of personal connection in her lyrics.

As for her vocal efforts, Adams remembers Whitfield teaching her that "Simple is so amazing." "If you take the simplest song with the simplest words, you can make anybody cry," said Whitfield. "But the ultimate goal is not to make them cry...it's to make them understand what you just sang." Adams reflected on Whitfield's impact as a singer in the midst of his contemporaries:

I learned so much from him. He was in the same era as Daryl Coley and James Moore. While he was not technically a runner, so to speak...you know, James Moore could squall

⁵⁷ Yolanda Adams, in discussion with the author, March 2018.

and run a house out! But there was something about Thomas Whitfield's singing...you felt that this man has gone through the same thing you've gone through. He had this power behind his singing...his writing. He had to be thinking when he wrote this. He had to be *feeling* when he wrote that. As we recorded, one of the things that I noticed was that he would not allow just a 'good take.' He would say, "You have a greater one in you."

Adams remembered Whitfield often saying, "I'm not the greatest singer. But nobody's going to beat me pouring my heart out."

Yolanda's project *Just As I Am*, released in 1987, set a new standard in the evolution of high-quality recording for contemporary gospel solo artists. From the album's ear-grabbing jazzy intro on V. Michael McKay's "I Am," to the pop-infused take on Jonathan Dubose's "Signs of the Time," to the stirring gospel ballads "Just as I Am" and "Wash Me," Thomas Whitfield set Adams's career in motion to later become the Darling of Gospel Music and one of the defining voices of contemporary gospel.

Aretha Franklin

By the mid '80s, the late Queen of Soul, Aretha Franklin, was one whose career certainly needed no jumpstart. The Detroit-bred child of New Bethel had released one of the most successful gospel albums in history, *Amazing Grace*, in 1972.⁵⁸ In 1987 she approached Thomas Whitfield about being the music director for the long-awaited sequel album, *One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism*. Whitfield, more than excited about the prospect, came to Franklin with the idea of bringing a more contemporary edge to the project. He wanted to, in part, revamp and rerecord some of the major contemporary gospel hits of recent years. The Queen of Soul, however, had other ideas. James Cleveland, who was a significant force in the production of *Amazing Grace*, expressed his thoughts on the 1987 album:

⁵⁸ *Amazing Grace* is still the highest selling live-recorded gospel album of all time. It won Franklin a GRAMMY for Best Soul Gospel Performance.

Given the talent that she assembled, it should have been a much better record. But I could tell from the outset that it was going to be rough riding. Aretha took it all on herself – every little detail. I tried to tell her that she needed a producer and nominated myself for the job. I tried to tell her that it was enough that she simply be the main vocalist. She didn't need to be an organizer. Organization is her greatest weakness. She took offense. In fact, she never called me back, and my invitation to come to Detroit was put on permanent hold. I never knew why.⁵⁹

This was undoubtedly a different experience for Whitfield, as Franklin had established almost complete creative control over the project. Unfortunately, it was her unwillingness to relinquish creative reins to either Cleveland or Whitfield that caused the album to critically pale in comparison to the success of *Amazing Grace*. Even so, there are faint but evident glimpses of Whitfield's genius displayed throughout the recording, from his reimagining of the traditional "Walk in the Light," to his arrangements of sacred standards such as "The Lord's Prayer" and "Ave Maria."⁶⁰ The latter is a brilliant fusion of both the Schubert and Bach/Gounod settings of the sacred text, featuring Franklin and Whitfield in a captivating duet. Despite stumbling blocks during this recording experience, Franklin won both a GRAMMY and a Dove award for the album, and she and Whitfield developed.⁶¹ "Aretha Franklin would call the house day and night," remembered Gwen Morton. "[She] was crazy about Thomas Whitfield." According to Gwen, Aretha even promised to sing at their wedding.⁶²

Departing from Sound of Gospel

Whitfield continued to produce albums for the Company throughout the '80s, as well as for other choirs. He released two albums with the Gospel Soul Children of New Orleans in 1983 and 1986, the latter producing the original version of the regularly covered Whitfield classic, "Wrapped

⁵⁹ David Ritz, *Respect: The Life of Aretha Franklin* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2014), 375.

⁶⁰ Yet another setting of "Walk in the Light" exists on *Hallelujah Anyhow*.

⁶¹ Franklin used Whitfield as her accompanist on several occasions, most notably for the Papal visit to Detroit in 1988.

⁶² Gwen Morton, in discussion with the author, June 2018. All subsequent quotes by Morton are from this interview.

Up, Tied Up, Tangled Up,” as well as a cover of the high-energy Pentecostal tune from the pen of the late Dr. Mattie Moss Clark, “Climbing Up The Mountain.”⁶³ Whitfield also produced the debut album for a choral ensemble formed by one of his founding members, Michael Fletcher. The Michael Fletcher Chorale, which formed in 1982, debuted its first album, *Jesus...He's the One*, in 1988 with Sound of Gospel. It was one of Whitfield's last projects with SoG.

Whitfield produced three albums with the Company in the latter half of the decade. In 1985, they recorded *I'm Encouraged* live at the Civic Auditorium in Cleveland, Ohio. It was the first time he and protégé Rudolph Stanfield had worked together with the Company since the choir's earliest recording years in the 70s. Their reunion helped bring to light some of the Company's most enduring tunes, such as the title track, led by Gwen Morton. Other highlights included Whitfield's potent gospel ballad “When I'm Weak, I'm Strong,” his Pentecostal driven “Praise His Name,” and Stanfield's timeless setting of the hymn, “Never Alone,” led by the unforgettable voice of JoAnn Hill-Brown. The final track, “Dear Jesus,” was yet another sign of Whitfield's hand in creating the black praise and worship genre. *I'm Encouraged* made its way to No. 1 on the Billboard Top Gospel Album chart.

For twelve years the Whitfield Company presented its yearly Christmas concerts, “the Saturday before December 25th each year,” before finally making a live recording.⁶⁴ In 1988 *The Annual Christmas Services* project, recorded live at Wayne County Community College, featured, except for one track, arrangements all from the pen of Whitfield. That one exception was the Whitfield Company singing Randall Thompson's “Allelulia” with admirable precision. This was significant not only due to the rarity of gospel choirs delving into classical repertoire but because

⁶³ The 1983 recording was released with Onyx, while the 1986 recording was released with Gospel Fame (PLM). Onyx had since folded. John Askew is the original composer of the tune. Whitfield, however, revamped the song into the version popularly performed today.

⁶⁴ *The Annual Christmas Services*, liner notes.

many of the members of the Company, including even Whitfield, reportedly could not read music. Other highlights from the album included the stylish “Drummer Boy,” the soulful “Go and Tell It on the Mountain,” and the jazz- and soul-infused original tune “You Ought to Let the Joy Flow.”

...*And They Sang...a Hymn*, one of Whitfield’s most celebrated albums, was a compendium of hymn arrangements fused with a variety of musical influences. Songs such as “Down at the Cross,” “His Eye Is On The Sparrow,” as well as the new up-tempo rendering of “Nothing but the Blood of Jesus,” showcased how Whitfield maintained the integrity of the hymn melody, usually lined out by the soloist. These are refreshed with contemporary harmonizations and further bolstered by the almost Shakespearean commentaries of the Company in the chorus and vamp.

Celebrated gospel composer, A. Jeffrey LaValley, shared his thoughts about the album:

That was probably one of my favorite projects. I’m a hymn man...I love hymns. I grew up on hymns. I grew up C.O.G.I.C. We sang hymns as a kid, so that’s how I learned them. To hear how he took “Higher Ground” and took it straight to church. “Nothing but the Blood”...and two different versions of that same song. When you look at how he redressed them, but never strayed far away [from the melody]. Especially with “Nothing but the Blood”...he didn’t stray far from that melody with those solo lines. He stayed in context. “Higher Ground” was...fire. Totally different...then to stack those chords and to sit the vocals so perfectly on top. Again, it’s the uniqueness of what he did that made those things different.⁶⁵

...*And They Sang...a Hymn* signaled yet another innovation from Whitfield, the studio live concept. “We sang the songs,” remembered Company member and soloist Scott Bard-Mansur, “and then we responded to ourselves.”⁶⁶ Upon listening to the album, one can hear the choir acting as both performer and participant with handclaps, words of encouragement to the soloists, and exhortations of worship. The project garnered Whitfield and the Company their first GRAMMY nomination for Album of the Year, bringing an end to their relationship with Sound of Gospel. It was a fitting close to a decade that cemented Whitfield’s reputation as the “Maestro” (Fig. 1.3).

⁶⁵ A. Jeffrey LaValley, in discussion with the author, December 2017. All subsequent quotes by LaValley are from this interview.

⁶⁶ Scott Bard-Mansur, in discussion with the author, December 2017.



Figure 1.3. Thomas Whitfield with Brian Spears and Shirley Caesar at United Sound Studios. Photograph courtesy of Brian Spears.

The Final Years

As the '80s came to a close, Thomas Whitfield had established his role as an innovator in the evolution of contemporary gospel music. The Company was a standard-bearer for gospel choirs across the nation. Meanwhile, his production work on his solo albums and otherwise had garnered widespread attention both inside and outside of the industry. The '90s, however, would witness arguably Whitfield's most influential work, and the unexpected tragedy that forever changed the course of gospel music.

My Faith

By the end of the last decade, Whitfield felt it was time to move the Company from Sound of Gospel over to Benson, where he had signed as a solo artist for several years. His second solo project, *My Faith* (1990) was a tour de force in terms of musical output. The first track, "Glorify the Lord," was already a well-known tune from the pen of the late Edwin Hawkins. "We all sung that," remembered A. Jeffrey LaValley, "but [Whitfield] took that song to another level. Not only the sound, but his arrangement, and to put that vamp on the end. And then to go from there to 'Let the holy praise Him...?' Dude, how do you come up with that?" Utilizing the vocal talents of Detroit

contemporaries Karen Clark-Sheard and Vanessa Bell Armstrong on original compositions “The Grass Withereth” and “Lift Those Hands and Bless Him,” respectively, Whitfield exercised the fullness of the contemporary sound he had been developing over the last decade.

One original composition in particular would help cement his status as a leader of black praise and worship music. “I’ll never forget he called me up one morning,” recalled friend and Company co-founder T.J. Hemphill. “He said, ‘I’ve got something for you, T.J. I know you’re gonna like this, man. This is your style.’ He played it for me. It was ‘We Need a Word from the Lord.’ I said, ‘Doc, that’s it. That is a flat out hit.’ And of course, people have been singing that for years.” Whitfield, who had for years in his early development been anxious about singing, had originally written “We Need a Word from the Lord” for gospel artist Larnell Harris. However, due to contractual issues, as well as some stern support from his mother, Jacqueline, he released the song on his solo project. The tune has become one of his most oft-covered compositions, having been recorded by artists such as Vickie Winans and Bishop Yvette Flunder.

The final track, perhaps the most intimate of all his writings, next to “Hold Me,” was inspired by his muse, Gwen Morton. She recalled the experience:

I’ll never forget when he wrote: “In Case You’ve Forgotten.” I’ll never forget going into his office. He was broken. He felt like his music was not getting out there, or appreciated like it should be. The Winans had just done a song...I can’t remember the name. It was very popular, but it didn’t have “Jesus” in it at all. He said, “Gwen, I can’t take Jesus out of my music. What do I do?” I said to him, “Don’t take it out. You write that, anyway.” He was in his office...and he wrote, *Just in case you’ve forgotten my name...it’s Jesus.*

My Faith earned Whitfield GRAMMY and Stellar Award nominations for Album of the Year.

Tommie and Gwenie

Gwendolyn Morton, affectionately referred to as “Gwenie” by Thomas Whitfield, had known of him for some time before officially making his acquaintance. Gwen, whose mother passed away in 1970, actually lived with Dr. Mattie Moss-Clark for a time, even looking after her children,

the Clark Sisters. She sang with Dr. Clark's Southwest Michigan State Choir, as well as sang studio background with the Clark Sisters while one of the sibling members was on leave. While she and Whitfield indeed ran in the same musical circles for a time, it was not until the Morton family concert in New Orleans that the two officially connected.

"Honestly, what brought us together was a tragedy in our family," recalled Gwen. "My little niece drowned. She was five years old." This happened shortly before the proposed concert, and the family was on the verge of canceling. "He said, 'No, you all need this.'" Gwen, who remembered sinking into a dark and depressive state, said that her budding friendship with Whitfield was a healing remedy. "It literally changed my life," said Gwen.

As for his music, Gwen found his style and professionalism immediately attractive. "It sounded like me," she recalled. "It was the way I always sang when I was alone." Certainly, the connection was not lost upon Whitfield either. He told Gwen that whenever he wrote, he heard her voice. She recalled the recurring experience of his musings:

Tommie would write a song in the middle of the night, call me, and say, "I'm on my way to pick you up, because I need to work on this song." It could be 3 o'clock in the morning! He had the keys to this little church before he got his baby grand at home. We would go to the church, and he would rehearse. Sometimes, I would fall asleep while he was playing. But it was an honor to watch just what he did with music. It was just amazing.

Gwen, perhaps more than anyone, was privy to Whitfield's writing process. "He would call me and teach a song to me, just so he could hear how it would go." On one particular occasion, their connection would inspire one of his most enduring compositions—"Precious Jesus."

I'll never forget, one Sunday afternoon we were driving in the car and headed to the store. I was laughing at a song someone had written. I said, "People need to stay in their lane. Everybody's not a writer." He said, "Gwen, you could write!" I said, "Yeah, right. I could write." He said, "Say to me what you would say if you were writing a song to the Lord." I said to him, "Precious Jesus, how I love you." I said *how*, he said *now*. I got out the car to go into the store for us...when I came back, he had written "Precious Jesus." We rushed home to the piano. I was in tears.

The relationship between Thomas and Gwen continued to blossom as the two began officially dating at the onset of the new decade. Thomas proposed to Gwen on Christmas Eve of 1991. The wedding was to happen less than a year later, on October 3, 1992.

Alive and Satisfied

Upon the Company's signing with Benson Records, Whitfield and group prepared for their first recording with the label. The subsequent project, *Alive and Satisfied*, would be Whitfield's last. His dream had been to take the choir to London to do a live recording. Whitfield had performed there and in Birmingham in 1988, and expressed to the choir that he had experienced no such worship as he had experienced abroad. "He was trying to get the choir to understand what he called *high praise*," remembered Company president Donna Harris.⁶⁷ Brian Spears, who had managed Whitfield for the last eight years, spoke about how they came up with the title:

The title came up in the studio. We were doing some overdubs. It was supposed to be a live album...but the cost of moving the choir was so prohibitive that we convinced the record company we could create a live setting in a studio environment. So Thomas decided that whatever we name this album, the word 'alive' had to be in it. Then came up with 'and satisfied' because we are satisfied in the spirit of the Lord.⁶⁸

Alive and Satisfied serves as the culmination of Whitfield's gift to the gospel industry.

Countless writers, producers, singers and instrumentalists have hailed the album as a defining influence on the genre. From its opening praise-and-worship anthem "Precious Jesus," to the regularly sampled vamp found in the churchy "Let Everything Praise Him," to his soul-stirring solo cover of an earlier recorded composition, "In Case You've Forgotten," *Alive and Satisfied* displayed the wealth of versatility in Whitfield, coupled with the fresh technological innovations now available

⁶⁷ Donna Harris in conversation with the author, September 2018. All subsequent quotes by Harris are from this interview.

⁶⁸ Lisa Collins, "Master Producer Thomas Whitfield, 38, Dies...Among the Pioneers of Contemporary Gospel Music," *Billboard Magazine*, July 1992.

to him.⁶⁹ The final track, the “We Remember (Medley),” is a reflective string of the Company’s most enduring classics from over the years. Simply put, *Alive and Satisfied* was Whitfield’s love letter to the gospel music community.

Opportunities of a Lifetime

By the time of the album’s release in 1992, Whitfield received two significant opportunities. Mervyn Warren, a founding member of Take 6 and noted music producer, had approached him about taking part in Quincy Jones’ *A Soulful Celebration*.⁷⁰ The landmark project featured arrangements and performances by artists as varied as Richard Smallwood and the Richard Smallwood Singers, Commissioned and The Clark Sisters, Al Jarreau, and Tevin Campbell (Figs. 1.4 and 1.5). Around that time, Paramount Pictures reached out to Whitfield. They initially approached him regarding working on the soundtrack for an upcoming motion picture, *Leap of Faith*, starring Steve Martin. Upon meeting him, however, the producers were entranced by Whitfield’s larger than life personality and offered him a role in the film. The character, Hoover, doubled as a cursing, alcohol drinking bus driver and a zany choir conductor. While the role was no doubt one of high profile, Whitfield was troubled by the prospect of his image in the gospel music community being tarnished by appearing in the film. “There was a time when I wrote music for the church that led people straight to Him, yet I didn’t know Him, myself.” Whitfield had much to think on in the waning weeks of his life.

⁶⁹ Whitfield has often been credited as one of the forerunners of black praise-and-worship music. “In Case You’ve Forgotten” was originally recorded on his second solo project, *My Faith*.

⁷⁰ The album is a reinterpretation of several popular movements from Handel’s *Messiah*, utilizing black idiomatic musical influences. Reportedly, Whitfield was to create and perform an arrangement of “Surely He Hath Borne Our Grief” for the recording.



Figure 1.4. Whitfield (right) with Al Jarreau at the recording session for Soulful Celebration. Photo courtesy of Brian Spears.



Figure 1.5. Whitfield and Tramaine Hawkins at the recording session for Soulful Celebration. Photo courtesy of Brian Spears.

The Final Week

The week leading up to Saturday, June 13, 1992, Thomas Whitfield & Company prepared to take the stage at the Chicago Gospel Festival. The 8th annual gathering featured a lineup of some of gospel music's most legendary figures, as well as its most innovative personalities. The Company was scheduled to perform alongside other established groups like Walt Whitman & the Soul Children of Chicago, Rev. Milton Brunson & the Thompson Community Singers, as well as a newer ensemble called the New Life Community Choir, led by the young and aspiring architect of urban contemporary gospel, John P. Kee.

Fresh from the release of *Alive and Satisfied*, Whitfield & Company delivered a potent set, stringing together songs such as "Precious Jesus," "Oh, Hallelujah," "Let Everything that Hath Breath," and "Only a Look" from the new album. Interspersed was Whitfield's fiery revamp of Edwin Hawkins' "Glorify the Lord" from the *My Faith* project. The Company ended the set with his timeless setting of "Oh, How I Love Jesus." It was the last time Thomas Whitfield and the Company performed together.

Shortly after the set, Whitfield reportedly suffered a minor heart attack. Instead of going to the hospital, however, he asked to be taken to his hotel room in Chicago. Company member Scott Bard recalled boarding the bus and being told that they were headed not homeward but to Whitfield's hotel. When the Company members arrived to his room, Whitfield had each of the members walk past his bed. "He just wanted to look at us and hug us," Scott said. The Company, understandably baffled by this, had no idea about what was to transpire just a week later.

During the course of the next week, Whitfield was preoccupied. In the midst of this, his fiancée Gwen became ill and needed to have surgery while he was to be out of town. He was preparing to travel to Texas for a major concert at which he was slated to perform. "Earlier in that week, he taught me a song," Gwen remembered. "The doctor said that while I was under anesthesia, I was singing all the time." The song was called "I've Got Victory After All." "I look back at it now, and I know that Thomas knew he was going to die."

Thomas' brother Larry recalled speaking with him before he left town. "I used to cut Tommy's hair and beard," said Larry. "We got into a weird conversation...he started talking about who he didn't want talking at his funeral." More than that, Thomas went into specifics about his attire, and of course, the music. "I want you to play this piece of music," Thomas said. "This music represents what I am about, musically. My life as an artist." The piece was the final theme from the 1985 film *Return to Oz*. It brought Whitfield to tears every time he heard it.

As for his trip to Texas, because he was not able to take the Company, he needed assistance finding a backing choir. Brian Spears recalled the experience:

Somebody told [Whitfield] that there was this young guy that did wonders with choirs. It turned out being Kirk Franklin. Me and Tommie got Kirk Franklin on a three-way. [Whitfield] said, "Hey, man. I'm coming out there. Can you pull together a choir for me?" Kirk...you could tell he was ecstatic about talking to Tommie Whitfield. So Kirk pulled a choir together, and Tommie did the concert.

When Whitfield returned to Detroit, Brian could tell that he was physically exhausted. Thomas, whose immense weight and subsequent health issues had been a concern for years, was losing steam.

June 20th, 1992

It was a Saturday, and Whitfield went to the hospital to visit his “Gwenie,” who had successfully undergone surgery the day before Gwen remembered the doctor telling Thomas, “It’s so good she had this surgery. She wouldn’t be living [otherwise].” Thomas looked at her and said, “If you died, I don’t know what I’d do, but if I die, you’re going to be okay” (Fig. 1.6). Later that day, Whitfield went to Grace Community Church for the Company rehearsal. He sat down with Donna Harris to discuss several things on his mind before commencing rehearsal. While the *Leap of Faith* project would have certainly been monetarily beneficial to he and the Company as they prepared to tour their latest project, he decided to decline the offer. Additionally, Whitfield discovered that his mother, Jacqueline, was recently diagnosed with cancer.⁷¹

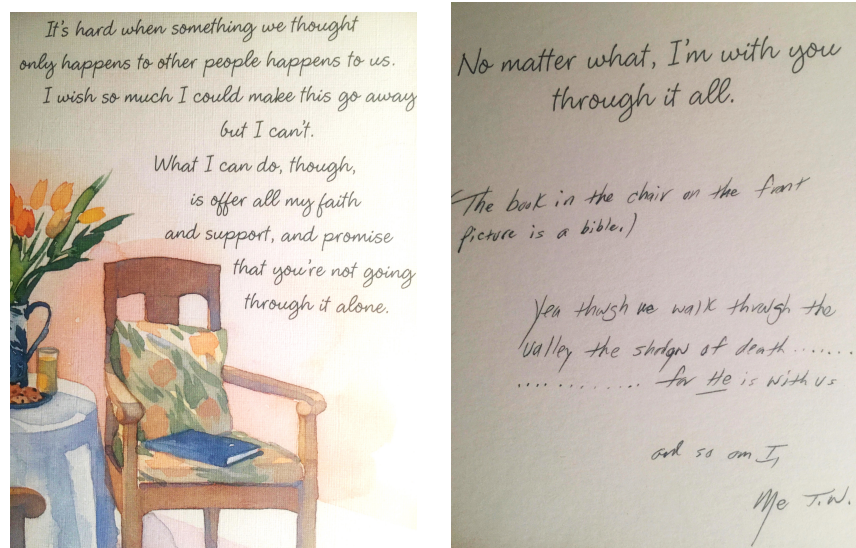


Figure 1.6. Card of support from Whitfield to Gwen Morton. Photo courtesy of Gwen Morton.

⁷¹ Whitfield’s father, Thomas Henry, died some years earlier.

Even with a heavy heart and mind, Whitfield began rehearsal with a letter of encouragement to the Company. The letter was from a college student who had previously considered committing suicide. A friend shared with him the recording of *Alive and Satisfied*, which opens with “Precious Jesus.” The song encouraged the student to decide against suicide, as well as to attend church that following Sunday. Upon confirming his decision to not appear in *Leap of Faith*, Whitfield urged the Company to reexamine its Mission Statement: *A message to the world...Jesus saves.*

What transpired next is what Donna Harris referred to as a “Pentecostal experience.”

Michael Fletcher said this of the experience:

Rehearsal was a little different than most rehearsals. Tommy actually stood up and ministered to us, probably about a good hour before rehearsal...He talked about not compromising the gospel...After rehearsal, he just kind of hugged everybody individually. And I was one of the last ones that he hugged that night. Actually, I think the last one. And he kind of drew me into himself, kind of real tight. And then as I was going away from him, [he] kind of pulled me to himself again, like for a second time...I’m just of the notion and thought to believe that Tommy knew that his demise was soon.

Whitfield and several Company members went out to eat after the rehearsal at Elias Brothers’ Big Boy. He suffered a fatal heart attack there and was pronounced dead at the Garden City Hospital on June 21, 1992, Father’s Day. He was 38 years old.

The Aftermath

Thomas Whitfield’s sudden death stunned the gospel industry, leaving a great many things seemingly undone. Not long before his passing, Brian Spears shared with Whitfield a rough edit of a recording by the Tri-City Singers, a relatively new and burgeoning gospel group from North Carolina. The song, “I Believe in Miracles,” composed by their new musical director, was part of an upcoming project entitled *A Songwriter’s Point of View*. The songwriter Donald Lawrence originally intended for Whitfield to record the introductory section of the piece. “The front of it was the way I felt Tommy would approach those songs that start off in freestyle,” stated Lawrence, “like ‘Nobody

But Jesus' or Yolanda's 'Wash Me.'" Unfortunately, Whitfield was unable to do so—the night of the group's first recording session conflicted with the Maestro Awards. However, upon listening to the rough edit, he was immediately taken aback. "[Thomas] couldn't believe how much I channeled him," recalled Lawrence. The two scheduled a call for Monday, June 22, 1992, the day after Whitfield passed.

Vanessa Bell Armstrong, who found her first great successes working with Whitfield nearly a decade earlier, was back in the studio with him preparing a new album, *Something On The Inside*. The final four tracks were written and co-produced by Whitfield and Earl J. Wright, Jr.⁷² When Armstrong heard of Whitfield's passing, her response was similar to many others who received the call that evening—disbelief. She called him and left a message. "Thomas, I need you to call me...somebody's telling me something that ain't right." Her call with Brian Spears afterwards confirmed the fears of both she and the gospel community at large.

Armstrong sang in final tribute to her old friend at his funeral service on Saturday, June 27, 1992 at the St. Paul Life & Praise Center (Fig. 1.7). The selection was Whitfield's arrangement of "Peace Be Still," the song that he convinced her to record on her debut album.⁷³ Several other longtime friends such as Rev. Charles Craig III, Bishop Paul Morton, Daryl Coley and Jennifer Holiday sang at the service, while Company co-founder T.J. Hemphill preached the eulogy. A massed choir made up of members of the Company, the Michael Fletcher Chorale, and Michael Mindingall & Communion sang at both the funeral and the memorial service, which was held the evening before at Greater Grace Temple. Michael Fletcher accompanied Hulah Gene Dunkin-Hurley on her standard solo rendering of "Never Alone," while Twinkie Clark accompanied her

⁷² Earl J. Wright, Jr. was a consistent collaborator with Whitfield, and played on many of the Whitfield Company recordings. His keyboard style is noted as being closest in resemblance to Whitfield, next to Rudolph Stanfield, Jr.

⁷³ Armstrong was initially hesitant to do so due to Rev. Cleveland's success with this his original composition. The arrangement has since become a staple of her repertoire.

mother, Rev. Dr. Mattie Moss Clark on one of her most treasured compositions, “I Can Do All Things Through Christ.”⁷⁴

A Homegoing Celebration

~ For ~



MINISTER THOMAS ANTHONY WHITFIELD

SATURDAY, JUNE 27, 1992 AT 11:00 A.M.

Service To Be Held At
St. Paul Life & Praise Center
17400 MANDERSON
DETROIT, MICHIGAN

PASTOR TYRONE J. HEMPHILL, *Officiating*

Figure 1.7. Thomas Whitfield's memorial service program. Courtesy of Sande Rose.

There was an abundance of support shown for Whitfield's family during their time of grievance. Upon hearing of Whitfield's death, Daryl Coley immediately flew to Detroit and stayed with Thomas' mother for the entire week, sleeping on her couch. Another young and aspiring devotee of Whitfield's stayed with the family and the Company until his burial at Mt. Hope

⁷⁴ Hulah Gene Dunkin Hurley was one of the leading soloists with the Voices of Tabernacle at Prayer Tabernacle. Whitfield wrote for and played on she and her daughter Carolyne's album entitled *God Has Done So Much*.

Cemetery. Just a year earlier Thomas wrote a letter to the gospel composer, sending his apologies for not being able to attend the debut concert of he and his singers. “You are a great talent,” wrote Whitfield, “and may the Lord encourage you as you watch and listen to the testimony of what your music is and can do for the body of Christ.” The recipient of said letter was Kurt Carr (Fig. 1.8).

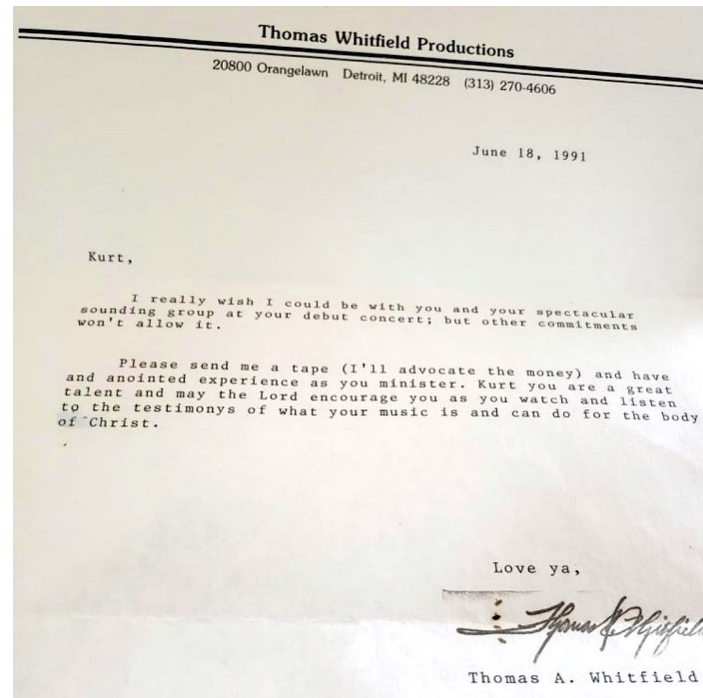


Figure 1.8. Letter from Whitfield to Kurt Carr, June 18, 1991. Photo courtesy of Kurt Carr.

Several years after Whitfield’s passing, the Stellar Awards committee had a roundtable discussion concerning who should receive the James Cleveland Lifetime Achievement Award.⁷⁵ Fred Nelson, who at that time served as music director for the Stellers, almost immediately offered up Thomas Whitfield as a possible recipient. The committee members looked at each other around the table and finally asked Nelson, “Who is that?”⁷⁶

⁷⁵ The Stellar Gospel Music Awards is the first and oldest televised awards show honoring gospel music artists.

⁷⁶ Fred Nelson in discussion with the author, January 2018.

Perhaps more tragic than Whitfield's passing was the fact that the premiere institution for celebrating Black gospel music had seemingly forgotten the man who set the course for the musical developments happening then and today within the genre. Thankfully, due to the tireless efforts of people such as Fred Nelson and Donald Lawrence, the Stellar Awards committee could think of none other more deserving. Thomas Whitfield received the James Cleveland Lifetime Achievement Award, posthumously, in 1999. It was Cleveland who stated that Whitfield understood what he had been trying to say decades earlier about the necessary trajectory of Black gospel music.

Today, even as gospel music has shifted into many areas almost as varied as that of jazz, the "Whitfield Sound" is ever-present. Gospel music luminaries of recent years such as Donald Lawrence, Fred Hammond, Byron Cage, and Kirk Franklin have all credited Whitfield as a major influence on their writing and production work. Consistent collaborators such as Rudolph Stanfield, Jr. and Earl J. Wright, Jr. remain perhaps the closest to the keyboard style of the late pioneer. However, instrumentalists all over are playing "Whitfield" chords, turns, and phrases in gospel music, whether knowingly or otherwise. His influence is such that his style has created for him a vocabulary all its own.

Many have wondered what would become of gospel music if Thomas Whitfield were still alive. Others have even questioned if the industry has failed him in maintaining a standard of ministry. All the while, the legacy of Thomas Whitfield has earned him numerous monikers and placeholders in the history of gospel music. Perhaps the most poignant, though, came from the legendary instrumentalist and producer Steven Ford: "Thomas Whitfield was our Shakespeare."⁷⁷

⁷⁷ Steven Ford in discussion with the author, February 2018.

CHAPTER TWO

INFLUENCES ON WHITFIELD

Three years after Thomas Whitfield's passing, the Michael Fletcher Chorale released its third project: an album entitled *Highest Praise*. Rudolph Stanfield, Jr. served as producer and contributed all but three songs to the project. Two of the remaining songs were written by Whitfield. The third was by Herman Harris. Harris, a close friend and mentor of Whitfield, is part of a line of several significant figures who profoundly influenced Thomas's work. Within the liner notes of the *Highest Praise* album, Darryl H. Ford wrote of several pioneers who with their "chord structures and stacked harmonies... filled the head, heart, mind, spirit and finally the fingers of a then young man we would come to know as Maestro – the late Minister Thomas Anthony Whitfield."⁷⁸

As Ford details, individuals such as Alfred Bolden and Herbert Pickard were integral figures in Whitfield's development as an instrumentalist. Regarding his writing, Thomas looked to many different musical sources for inspiration, and they were indeed not always within the sacred realm. While early mentors such as Rev. James Cleveland and Herman Harris did much to fuel more of the religious intent, two artists from a decidedly more mainstream background served as a founding influence on Whitfield's harmonic and production innovations in gospel music. Gino Vannelli and Quincy Jones, listed among his favorite musicians in a 1981 Detroit Free Press article, are two composers whose trendsetting work in jazz and popular music idioms helped set the stage for Thomas Whitfield. This chapter addresses how the work of Bolden, Pickard, Cleveland, Harris, Vannelli, and Jones formed the musical palette from which Whitfield drew to create his unique sound in gospel music.

⁷⁸ Darryl H. Ford, liner notes to *Highest Praise*, Michael Fletcher Chorale, Sound of Gospel, Audio Cassette, 1995.

Alfred Bolden

Darryl Ford codified his list of Whitfield’s musical predecessors as “names which may not be familiar to you.” The first of these was Alfred Bolden (Fig. 2.1). Little is spoken of him today, and even less is written on his life and work. When Bolden passed away in 1970 at the age of 34, he was younger than both Whitfield and Rev. Charles Craig when they died. However, his work in elevating the role of the Hammond organ in gospel music is perhaps only second in significance to Kenneth Morris, who first introduced the instrument to the Black church in 1939.

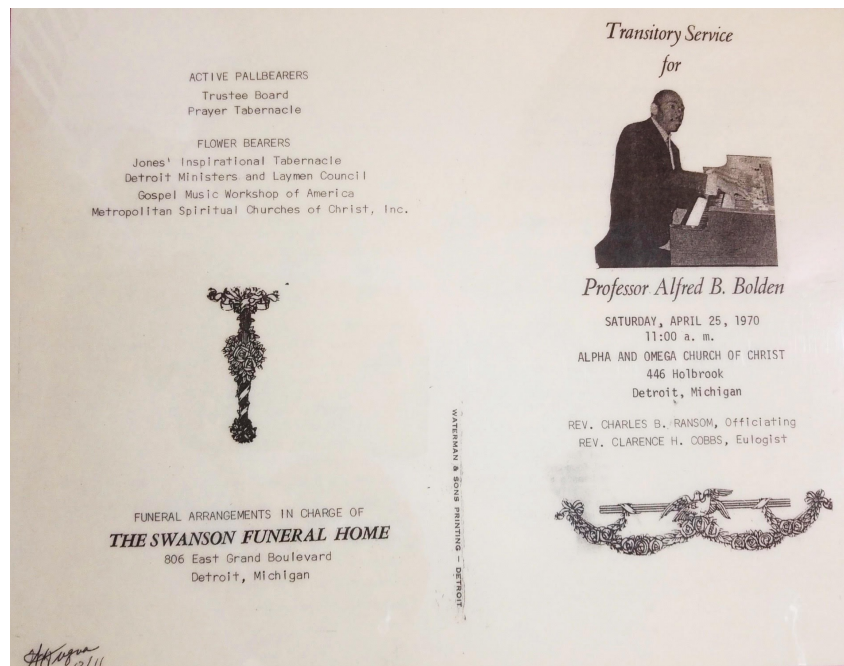


Figure 2.1. Alfred Bolden’s memorial service program. Courtesy of Sandra Rose.

In his book titled *The Golden Age of Gospel*, gospel music historian Horace Clarence Boyer wrote that Alfred Bolden was a “classically trained organist who was able to turn that technique into gospel.” He went on to say that Bolden “recorded several albums of organ gospel, hoping to identify

that instrument as a solo voice in gospel.”⁷⁹ One album in particular, *Presenting Alfred Bolden, World's Greatest Gospel Organist*, is not only a brilliant display of Bolden's skill as an organist but a clear sign of his influence upon the legion of Hammond church organists who would follow him, Whitfield included. Bolden is credited as being the first to utilize and incorporate Western art techniques into the gospel medium on the organ. His use of inventive registrations, dramatic swells and dynamic shifts during his recorded interpretations of hymns such as “Only What You Do For Christ Will Last” and “Amazing Grace” were foundational in terms of bringing the Hammond organ out of a merely “accompanimental” status quo. The florid bounce and impeccably timed rhythms of his playing of up-tempo gospel music standards like “Great Name” and “Get Right Church” solidify Bolden's position as one of the earliest organists to introduce shout music into the Black church.

“Great Name” is an instrumental take on Rev. Charles Craig's choral composition “Jesus.” The song was an early hit with the Voices of Tabernacle, a choir for which Alfred Bolden served as organist from their initiation in 1958 until his death. In 1965 he resigned from his post as organist at Prayer Tabernacle—he left to form his choir and start a new Spiritual church with Rev. Roy C. Jones. His brief stint at Prayer Tabernacle was during the height of the church's popularity, as both Rev. Craig and Rev. James Cleveland were at the helm of the music ministry with the Voices of Tabernacle as the flagship ensemble. Thomas Whitfield often came to hear Bolden during the church's evening services. Once Thomas was recruited to assist the music ministry staff at Prayer Tabernacle he became firmly entrenched in the sophisticated gospel style that Bolden created at the Hammond. Whitfield used these techniques well after Bolden's passing, even into his work with the Company. Bolden's famous shout progression found on “Great Name”—harmonically centered on traditional blues chord changes—is used by Whitfield in his recording of “Jesus Lifted Me” on the

⁷⁹ Horace Clarence Boyer, *How Sweet the Sound: The golden Age of Gospel* (Washington, D.C.: Elliot & Clark Publishing, 1995), 134.

Alive and Satisfied project. Thomas's use of Western classical techniques in his organ and piano playing was no doubt inspired by his time listening to and playing with Bolden and yet another highly influential musician at Prayer Tabernacle.

Herbert "Pee-Wee" Pickard

Shortly after Thomas Whitfield left Prayer Tabernacle to start the Company, he asked Rudolph Stanfield to play an evening service at the church. Stanfield arrived, only to find someone already playing. He marveled at the sound, more so because it sounded just like Whitfield's playing, although he knew Thomas was not there. The pianist was none other than Herbert Pickard, and Stanfield recalls from that day he realized from whom Thomas Whitfield's playing was so inherently inspired.⁸⁰

Pickard was a child prodigy and a Detroit native, and he regularly attended the historic New Bethel Baptist Church, pastored by Rev. C.L. Franklin. It was here that he came into contact with gospel music legends such as Rev. James Cleveland and Prof. Alex Bradford. Bradford, who became a close friend and mentor of Pickard, afforded the young pianist opportunities inside and outside Detroit. One of his musical career's first great successes was with the famed Dorothy Love Coates and the Original Gospel Harmonettes. While he first collaborated with the group as its organist in 1953—Evelyn Starks played the piano—his role transferred to the piano in 1955 after Starks's departure. Undoubtedly, Pickard's second claim to fame was his tenure as pianist for the Voices of Tabernacle. Along with organist Alfred Bolden, Pickard helped to usher in the new and sophisticated sound in gospel music that distinguished Detroit as an innovative leader in the field.

Like Bolden, Pickard regularly fused Western classical techniques in his gospel playing. Idella Johnson, in her document detailing "The Development of African American Gospel Piano Style

⁸⁰ Rudolph Stanfield, Jr. in conversation with the author, December 2017.

(1926-1960),” referred to an interviewee’s commentary on Pickard’s innovation in gospel piano playing:

[This] guy was so fluent with his piano playing – what you call these arpeggios, and the stuff that Liberace was doing in his classical style, [Pickard] was actually incorporating that into the gospel style. So everybody was mesmerized by his [playing] – it was almost like somebody was playing a harp, the way he would play the piano.⁸¹

One recording in particular is a clear demonstration not only of the commentary mentioned above on Pickard’s extraordinary gift as a pianist in the gospel style, but also the undeniable influence Pickard had on a young Thomas Whitfield. Pickard’s solo recording debut on Savoy Records in 1968, *Soul Piano*, features an interpretation of the gospel music standard “It Took A Miracle.” The track, introduced in a free-form rendering before translating into a gospel ballad tempo, is very much classically informed. Pickard’s use of florid arpeggios and doubled octave riffs as found in this recording no doubt inspired the kind of improvisatory piano playing found in Whitfield’s introit to his recording of “Hold Me.”

Herbert Pickard and Alfred Bolden served as Whitfield’s most significant influences from an instrumental standpoint. Dorgan Needom recalls Pickard stating that on many an occasion during rehearsals with the Voices of Tabernacle both Bolden and Whitfield would hasten to hear Pickard’s improvisatory ideas so that they could prepare the same to play note-for-note at the following rehearsal. This happened to the point where Pickard would wait until the formal recording session to utilize his best musical ideas, just so the two would be unable to replicate his playing.

Pickard outlived Whitfield, Bolden, Cleveland and Craig. He passed away in 2016, leaving a legacy that inspired both Whitfield and another classically influenced gospel music legend, Richard Smallwood. Like so many others, Smallwood was introduced to Pickard through his work with the Voices of Tabernacle on their landmark recording of “The Love of God.” Theirs was a revamping

⁸¹ Idella Lulamae Johnson, “The Development of African American Gospel Piano Style (1926-1960): A Socio-Musical Analysis of Arizona Dranes and Thomas A. Dorsey” (Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2009), 170.

of the classic Soul-Stirrers' tune. The arranger and vocal lead was none other than Rev. James Cleveland.

Rev. James Cleveland

In *The Future of the Race*, Cornel West and Henry Louis Gates provide a brief list of the “most profound black cultural products.” It includes John Coltrane’s sax solos, James Baldwin’s essays, and James Cleveland’s “gut gospels.”⁸² The once-proclaimed “Crown Prince of Gospel” James Cleveland almost single-handedly redefined gospel music, ushering the art form into the modern era by popularizing the massed choir concept and contemporizing the songwriting format. Although Cleveland was born in Chicago, it was his time in Detroit at Prayer Tabernacle that served as the birthplace of his most formative and arguably most groundbreaking work.

Cleveland’s was already a significant name in the gospel music industry by the time he reached Detroit in the late 1950s. His tenure as the pianist and musical director for the Caravans was a tumultuous but successful one, and his knack for songwriting and song-leading was becoming that of legend. And yet, he longed for more. While in Detroit he worked briefly with Ernestine Rundless and the Meditation Singers, directed the choir at Rev. C.L. Franklin’s New Bethel Baptist Church, and taught Franklin’s daughter Aretha to play piano. However, it was the call he received from Rev. Charles Craig that changed his life forever.

James Cleveland became Prayer Tabernacle’s first Minister of Music in 1958, almost immediately co-founding the Voices of Tabernacle with Craig. That same year, the Voices recorded their debut album, *The Love of God*. The recording, most famously featuring the title track was a

⁸² Cornel West, “Black Strivings in a Twilight Civilization,” in *The Future of the Race*, edited by Cornel West and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 81.

landmark success.⁸³ Barry C. Johnson, Sr. states that Cleveland's triumph with The Voices of Tabernacle turned him from "years of struggling" into "a major gospel attraction."⁸⁴

Several key factors surrounding Cleveland's tenure at Prayer Tabernacle not only proved crucial for his career but also heavily influenced the work of Thomas Whitfield. One major element was Cleveland's ability to infiltrate older musical techniques into a more contemporary setting. Cleveland, who relished the call-and-response format of the spirituals, often placed these in his songs as repetitive "vamps," allowing room for both him and his best soloists to improvise. When listening to songs from Whitfield's repertory, such as "Hallelujah, Anyhow" or any of his hymn arrangements, it is clear that Whitfield adopted this same approach in his writing. Beyond that, even his improvisatory style of speak-sing in the worship setting on songs like "Precious Jesus" and "Dear Jesus" is based on the "half-crooning, half-preaching" style that Cleveland perfected in his contemporized yet still relatively traditional gospel style.⁸⁵

Another important element of influence deals with the origins of the songs themselves. Both "The Love of God" and the highly successful "Peace Be Still" were arrangements of songs initially written for smaller, tight-knit ensembles. "Peace Be Still," for example, has its origins in the sixteenth-century English madrigal. Cleveland transformed these songs into the massed choir format, and further revitalized them with "complex voicings and odd time signatures."⁸⁶ Whitfield's gift for re-envisioning traditional hymns, as on the album *...And They Sang...A Hymn*, demonstrates how he was inspired by Cleveland's innovations.

Although Cleveland moved to L.A. in the late 1960s, around the same time that Whitfield formally began his tenure at Prayer Tabernacle, the newly minted "King of Gospel Music" regularly

⁸³ The song was Johnnie Taylor's Soul Stirrers hit from the same year.

⁸⁴ Robert M. Marovich, *A City Called Heaven: Chicago and the Birth of Gospel* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 262.

⁸⁵ Horace Clarence Boyer. *How Sweet the Sound*, 248.

⁸⁶ Lisa Collins, "James Cleveland Dead at 59; He was Dubbed 'King' of Gospel Music," *Billboard*, February 23, 1991, 4.

returned to Detroit to record with the Voices of Tabernacle over the next decade. Cleveland and Whitfield formed a sort of father-son bond as the two collaborated at Prayer Tabernacle and elsewhere. Bishop Charles Craig, of the Craig Brothers, noted how Rev. Cleveland recognized Whitfield's gift. "Ain't nobody playing all them chords," Cleveland jokingly stated, "...can't nobody play them chords but him."⁸⁷

While not everyone at the time was ready to receive Whitfield's revelatory ideas—Bishop Charles Craig remembered that Savoy Records, in particular, did not care for Thomas' writing style—Cleveland provided him with a multitude of musical opportunities before his forming of the Company. Whitfield returned the favor when he revamped Rev. Cleveland's setting of "Peace Be Still" for Vanessa Bell Armstrong in the early 80s, shifting the tide of gospel music just as Cleveland did decades before. Cleveland was so moved by this that in 1984 at the Gospel Music Excellence Awards when he was awarded as Contemporary Producer of the Year, he relinquished the award to Whitfield, acknowledging that Thomas deserved it more.⁸⁸ It seemed as fitting a time as any to pass the torch.

Rev. James Cleveland died in February 1991, barely over a year in distance before the passing of Thomas Whitfield. Whitfield led a stirring rendition of "I Shall Wear A Crown" at Cleveland's funeral service in California, paying final tribute to his musical father figure. Even in death Cleveland was able to return the favor, as Whitfield was posthumously awarded the James Cleveland Award at the 14th annual Stellar Music Awards in 1999.

This document would be remiss if not to note the undeniable—although indirect—influence that Rev. Charles Craig had on Thomas Whitfield. Craig passed in 1968, just before Whitfield officially started working at Prayer Tabernacle. While perhaps even less is written of Craig than

⁸⁷ Gregory Gay, "The Craig Brothers Interview," *Gospel Flava*, 2017, <http://www.gospelflava.com/articles/craig-brothersinterview2007.html>.

⁸⁸ Molly Abraham, "Gospel Glory," *Detroit Free Press*, March 20, 1984, 6B.

Bolden, all accounts tell of his brilliant musical mind. “James Cleveland always had soulfulness,” said gospel musician Charles Clency, “[but] Charles Craig was the one who had the innovation and the musicianship.” Clency, one of the attendees at the now historic 1959 Voices of Tabernacle concert at First Church of Deliverance in Chicago, reveled at the sounds he had “never heard before in gospel.”⁸⁹ Rev. Craig was at the helm of it all, having initially assembled the team that consisted of Alfred Bolden, Herbert Pickard, and Rev. James Cleveland. Even without directly coming into contact with Craig, Whitfield was impacted by his teachings through the three musicians as mentioned above who gleaned from the man who “could hear all that and incorporated it into his music.”⁹⁰ Prayer Tabernacle—the house that Rev. Craig built—and all its members served as a significant influence for Thomas Whitfield.

Herman Harris

“He’s actually a leader of a sound that is all his own. He was way before his time...what [he] was about was a real contemporary sound.”⁹¹ Thomas Whitfield shared these sentiments in 1988 as he neared the close of arguably the most prolific decade of his life. Whitfield’s own “contemporary sound” was clearly influenced by the subject of his sentiments: Herman Harris (Fig. 2.2). Despite any lack of credit given to Harris for his work, the sound he created set the background for the evolution of not only contemporary gospel but also Black praise & worship music. For Thomas, Harris’s sound served as a crucial element in inspiring his writing.

⁸⁹ Marovich, *A City Called Heaven*, 261-262.

⁹⁰ Marovich, *A City Called Heaven*, 262.

⁹¹ Robin D. Givhan, “Gospel artist would like worldly success,” *Detroit Free Press*, December 7, 1988, 7B.



Figure 2.2. Herman Harris and Thomas Whitfield. Photo courtesy of Herman Harris.

Like Bolden and Pickard, Harris was a classically trained pianist. While Bolden and Pickard fused Western classical techniques with gospel music in their organ and piano playing, respectively, Harris utilized his knowledge of theory as a songwriter. Harris' songs are undoubtedly characterized by seamless modal shifts – this in stark contrast to the more stayed harmonic progressions of gospel music during that time. “I’ve never heard anyone change keys the way you do,” Whitfield often told Harris. The chorus in “Wounded for Me,” the song Herman Harris wrote for the 1995 *Highest Praise* project, is a perfect example of his ability to maneuver through various key centers in an almost undetectable fashion. The first two lines (*Wounded for me, wounded for me*)—sung by the sopranos—sits well enough in Db. However, with the use of one deceptive passing chord, the third line (*Down at the cross He was wounded for me*)—sung by the altos—suddenly shifts into Eb, albeit temporarily. Two more passing chords shift the song back to Db as the choir enters fully for the first time (*for my transgressions*)—back to Eb (*now I am free*)—then back to Db (*Jesus was wounded for me*) to end the chorus (Example 2.1).

Woun - ded for me... Woun - ded for me...

Down at the cross... He was woun - ded for me...

For my trans - ges-sions... And now I'm free... Je - sus was

woun - ded for me...

Example 2.1. “Wounded For Me” chorus. Transcribed with composer’s permission.
Transitional/passing chords denoted in yellow.

Yet another example is a song Harris wrote entitled “A Change In My Life.” The song was Herman’s 1977 debut single with the group he had founded a few years before, The Voices of Faith, Hope, and Love. Thomas Whitfield, who often played and co-produced with Harris, was the pianist

on this track. He became enamored not only by Harris’ characteristic modal shifts, but also by the soul-infused vocal inflection Herman had his singers use on the word “change.” “All of a sudden I started hearing that [little wiggle] thing that I did in a lot of groups...it became the standard...especially with the Voices of Tabernacle...and in a lot of Tommy’s stuff.”⁹² Harris’s harmonic and choral innovations with The Voices of Faith, Hope, and Love influenced much of Whitfield’s work with his Company.

Harris’ revelatory work as a songwriter—arguably more than any other discussed in this chapter—also influenced Whitfield’s entry into Black praise & worship music. Herman was signed to Light Records—around the same time as Andraé Crouch—and was a contracted songwriter for them and several other labels. “I wrote a song called ‘Praise the Lord,’” recalled Harris. “That was *way* before this new move of praise & worship.” When Harris sent the song—which initially only consisted of a chorus—to Library of Congress to be copyrighted, the song was returned to him with a note stating there was no such category as praise and worship. “I still have the documentation to that,” Harris remembered. The note continued by stating that a song must have a verse and chorus, and Harris complied, adding a verse to the song. “Now, everybody does worship music.”

Whitfield, a rather consistent collaborator with Harris, was just as inspired by his simple but intimate lyricism as by his harmonic innovation. One of Harris’ earlier contributions to praise & worship music was a song entitled “Oh, How I Really Love You, Lord.” The song’s sole instrumentation was Whitfield at the piano. “I think it’s the best song I’ve ever heard him play,” Harris said. Besides one short verse, the piece is a repetition of the chorus:

Oh, how I really love you, Lord.
Oh, how I really love you, Lord.
Oh, how I really love you, Lord.
Because you sacrificed your life for me.

⁹² Herman Harris in discussion with the author, January 2018. All subsequent quotes from Harris are from this interview.

While the song is colored by Harris’s characteristic modal shifts and modulations, “Oh, How I Really Love You, Lord” is a prime example of his innovative work in helping to introduce praise & worship music to the Black community.

Whitfield asked Harris to contribute a composition to the Michael Fletcher Chorale’s sophomore project. Harris played the song for him over the phone and Whitfield immediately replied; “Yeah, that’s the one.” The result of the conversation was the recording of Harris’s most well-known work, “We Have Come to Praise Him,” a song that has since become a praise & worship standard.⁹³ For his work in this context, Harris has often been considered one of the unsung fathers of Black praise & worship music. For Thomas Whitfield, Herman Harris was perhaps the most significant sacred musical influence outside of his nurturing at Prayer Tabernacle.

Gino Vannelli

Andre Woods, a close friend and mentee of Whitfield, recalled sitting in Thomas’s basement and being introduced to a song entitled “Keep on Walking.” Whitfield urged Woods to immediately “buy this man’s album and study it.” “We sat there and listened to that song about five or six times,” said Woods. “Who is he?”⁹⁴ He—the genre-defying artist known as Gino Vannelli—was listed as one of Whitfield’s most prominent secular musical influences. His impact on both Thomas’s writing and studio production innovations in gospel music is undeniable.

While Thomas Whitfield noted that he was “in his teens before he’d listen to anything but gospel,” he acknowledged that his mother, a pianist and vocalist, “was into progressive jazz.”⁹⁵

Montreal-born Gino Vannelli, who was also born into a musical family, started singing

⁹³ The song has been covered by artists such as Maurette Brown-Clark and sung all over the world.

⁹⁴ Andre Woods in conversation with the author, January 2018.

⁹⁵ Joyce Walker-Tyson, “The Whitfield sound is soaring high in heavenly music,” *Detroit Free Press*, September 14, 1981, 8F.

professionally in jazz clubs at age 11. His jazz background, combined with his love for classical music and for popular songs of the '40s and '50s, fueled the diversity of style in his writing. His musical inspirations ranged from the works of the early popular music arrangers of Frank Sinatra's day, such as Axel Stordahl and Nelson Riddle, to the music of late-19th- and early 20th-century classical composers, including Ravel, Tchaikovsky, Debussy, Stravinsky, and Gershwin. Further encouraged by the "musical changes that occurred in the '60s and '70s," Vannelli felt compelled to compose music in "more sophisticated modes of expression than pop had ever known."⁹⁶ Such makes for a most intriguing correlation between he and Whitfield, who served as a key player in creating a more sophisticated sound in gospel music than previously experienced within the genre.

The sophisticated sound of Vannelli's music in the mid to late '70s impacted the work of Whitfield severalfold. One song of Vannelli's in particular perhaps best illustrates these influences. "Ugly Man" is the second entry in Gino's album entitled *The Gist of the Gemini*, which was released in January 1976, just a year before Whitfield held his first rehearsal with the Company. From a harmonic standpoint, the song is a mesh of both the influences of jazz-fusion and neo-romanticism. The composition is characteristic of Vannelli's style, replete with extended harmonies, distorted chromatic passages, and moments of suspension-release. The musical language suits the text:

*I work no day with self-deception.
All that I am is one common grain of sand.
But the sun does rise for every man alive, and now my heart is clear:
For I have from what I do.
And I do just what I am.*

The intimacy of Vannelli's lyrics is as deeply personal and lush as is the musical texture of his writing. Thomas Whitfield's "Hold Me" is similar in both its musical texture and textual format:

*Hold me, when I feel my every foe.
Hold me, when my heart is getting cold.
Hold me, when I just don't understand.*

⁹⁶ John D'Agostino, "Mixing Pop and the Soul Music: Gino Vannelli hasn't always found it easy to reconcile his Top 40 success with his classical bent. But he's getting there," *Los Angeles Times* (1991).

*Hold me, and I won't let go of Your Hand.
I want to rest in you...*

While the innovation of Whitfield's elevated lyricism will be discussed further in the next chapter, it is important to note here the clear departure from traditional black church rhetoric found in his earlier writing. "Hold Me," a clear foray into the beginnings of Black worship music, has a connection, albeit indirect, to the secular work of Gino Vannelli.

Another of Vannelli's innovations that influenced Whitfield was the use of keyboard synthesizers in studio production. Vannelli spoke about the impact this had on the jazz industry in a 2005 interview with the Michigan Chronicle:

I think it had an impact in the sense that Joe (Vannelli) and I were the first to employ keyboard synthesizers in which you could play one note at a time. So what Joe and I would do is stack up these one-note-at-a-time synthesizers into either a string section or a brass section and tell people that when it was recorded. When companies like Korg, Moog, and a few others saw that we were two of the guys using it, they approached us and asked us if we would like to endorse the new polyphonic synthesizer. So it had some impact on technology.⁹⁷

Vannelli's penchant for orchestral textures in his music, whether recorded with a live orchestra or with the use of music technology, had a significant impact on Whitfield. Since Thomas had no financial backing to hire out an orchestra to record his music, the idea of using synthesizers to create an orchestral aesthetic was as practical as it was innovative. Both artists often went so far as to compose solely instrumental works for their albums, as in the case of Vannelli's "War Suite" from *The Gist of the Gemini*, as well as Whitfield's "Saints in Flight" from his second solo project, *My Faith*. Gino Vannelli and Thomas Whitfield shared a love for a varied repertoire of music, and this cosmopolitan taste is present in both of their oeuvres. Like Vannelli, Whitfield had a passion for orchestral scoring that nodded its head to the works of both classical composers and the popular

⁹⁷ David G. Watkins, "Jazz in Review; A candid conversation with Gino Vannelli, *Michigan Chronicle* (2005).

orchestral arrangers during Frank Sinatra's heyday. One of Sinatra's most treasured collaborators served as another significant influence for Whitfield.

Quincy Jones

"I think Quincy Jones is a master of music," recalled Whitfield in the 1981 Detroit Free Press article. "I'd like to have his versatility. He's too much."⁹⁸ Within the first chapter of Raymond Horricks's biography on Jones, a chapter aptly titled "Renaissance Man," he writes that "[Quincy's] versatility has to be explained." Horricks continues:

Quincy Jones, too, started out as a working jazz player and evolved over many years with big bands before leading a band of his own. Then he continued to evolve. In more recent years he has arranged and conducted for the greatest names in popular singing; has brought about an instrumental revolution within the music industry; and moved into TV, films, publishing, artists' management and, not least, record production...His versatility is such that it causes one to think even in terms in 'Renaissance Man'.⁹⁹

By the time of the 1981 interview with Whitfield, who expressed his great admiration for Quincy's movie scoring, his reputation as an orchestrator was one of legend. The Chicago native experienced a substantive wealth of musical inspiration, perhaps first gleaning from the stride piano players of the late '30s and early '40s with their "fantastic left-hands." His move to Seattle in the late '40s, however, proved to be even more foundational. From the spiritual fervor he experienced in the Baptist and Sanctified churches to his musical experiences in high school during which he "was in every musical organization in school," Jones was fully immersed in music from a very young age. His first venture in orchestration, a suite called *From the Four Winds*, was written before he turned sixteen. While Jones admittedly "never studied writing music" before then, he noted that the "form,

⁹⁸ Joyce Walker-Tyson, "The Whitfield sound is soaring high in heavenly music," *Detroit Free Press*, September 14, 1981, 8F.

⁹⁹ Raymond Harricks, *Quincy Jones* (New York: Hippocrene Books Inc., 1985), 7-10.

orchestration and imagination were even more mature” in comparison with some of his later compositions.¹⁰⁰

In addition to Jones’s work in church music and the more classical forms he studied in high school, he immersed himself in the world of modern jazz. Early influences included the likes of bandleaders such as Cab Calloway and Count Basie. There was also the legendary jazz trumpeter Clark Terry who taught and inspired Jones, then an aspiring trumpet player, himself. Perhaps the one that had the greatest impact on Jones was Ray Charles, the defining progenitor of soul music. “One of my very first arrangements,” recalled Jones, “was the result of Ray telling me how to voice brass. My idea of a perfect marriage in jazz would be [Ray’s] feeling with a very full technique to project and develop it.”¹⁰¹

Quincy Jones, always the consummate student, found perhaps his most potent of teachers in Paris—Nadia Boulanger. One of the most celebrated teachers of twentieth century composition, she taught the likes of Aaron Copland, Michel Legrand and Virgil Thompson. “She seems to know everything that’s ever happened in music,” said Jones of Boulanger. “And she’s so quick. In a single session she’ll sort out writing problems that have been bugging me for years.”¹⁰² Boulanger, just as admirable of Jones, once noted that in her life of teaching her two most treasured students were Igor Stravinsky and Quincy Jones.

The breadth of Jones’ musical acumen caused Duke Ellington – shortly before his passing – to task Quincy with “decategorizing American music.” This was as much a theoretical passing of the torch as between Rev. James Cleveland and Thomas Whitfield. To hear Jones’s music, in any context, is to hear the evolution of popular American music in the twentieth century. His sound, however continually informed by the music of the time, based in his first love—jazz. Likewise, the

¹⁰⁰ Harricks, *Quincy Jones*, 13.

¹⁰¹ Harricks, *Quincy Jones*, 15.

¹⁰² Harricks, *Quincy Jones*, 46.

Whitfield Sound is a sound fueled by Thomas's love for the music he found inside and outside of the four walls of the church.

The monumental influences of the figures discussed in this chapter cannot be overstated. Alfred Bolden encouraged Whitfield's inventiveness in fusing Western classical techniques into his gospel organ playing, and modeled for him new ways in revolutionizing shout music. Herbert Pickard helped cultivate the soloistic nature of Whitfield's piano playing. Rev. James Cleveland influenced Whitfield's work as an arranger, as well as his narrative concept in song-leading. Herman Harris impacted the progressiveness of Whitfield's harmonization in his writing, and lit the pathway for his entry into praise and worship music. Gino Vannelli also influenced Whitfield's harmonic language, albeit in a more secular light, and introduced him to the expansive symphonic textures available to him through the use of synthesizers in music production. Quincy Jones further encouraged Whitfield's diverse musical tastes by decategorizing American music as Whitfield helped to decategorize gospel music. Thomas Whitfield used these influences, combining them with his own innate gift in order to create his signature style—the Whitfield Sound.

CHAPTER THREE

THE WHITFIELD SOUND

Towards the latter half of the 20th century, there was a focal shift in the scene of gospel music. The city of Detroit, a major transportation hub during the Great Migration along with Chicago, the birthplace of Black gospel music, produced a new crop of gospel musicians with fresh ideas. Rev. Charles Craig, Rev. James Cleveland, Rev. Charles Nicks and Dr. Mattie Moss Clark were chief among those who helped to create the sophisticated sound of gospel music that Detroit became known for, compared to the more visceral utterings of Chicago's home-grown traditional style. Thomas Whitfield was born and reared during the height of this new era of classic gospel music. What he heard inside and outside of the church encouraged him to foster a style of gospel music that permeated the genre for decades to come.

The defining features of the Whitfield Sound are as follows: 1) the redefining of the choral sound in gospel music; 2) the blending of gospel, jazz, and classicism; 3) the creation of symphonic textures in gospel music; and 4) the deepening of intimacy in gospel song lyrics. From a musical standpoint, sophistication and elegance lies at the foundation of Whitfield's writing. From a spiritual standpoint, the message within his music was unadulterated in its intent and presentation. The Whitfield Sound is the sonic bridge between the gospel music of past and present.

Redefining the Choral Sound

Donald Lawrence, when asked how he would define the Whitfield Sound, described the style in terms of a kind of "Gothic Catholicism." He wrote that it exuded an "almost medieval choir overtone."¹⁰³ Lawrence's inclusion of the choral aspect within the style exemplifies how integral

¹⁰³ Donald Lawrence, in discussion with the author, March 2019.

Whitfield’s flagship ensemble, his Company, was to the development of the Whitfield Sound. With the Company—an extension of Whitfield’s experiences with earlier ensembles like the Voices of Tabernacle, the Beverly Glenn Chorale, and Voices of Faith, Hope, and Love—he was able to further the possibilities of choral singing within the gospel genre. Impacted by his work with Beverly Glenn and Herman Harris, Whitfield trained the choir to access the detail and precision of smaller ensembles, allowing the group to attain more complex harmonies in their singing than had prior been achieved in gospel music. Even so, the Company—nearly 50 strong—never lost the warm strength of sound as witnessed in the Voices of Tabernacle. Dr. Tony McNeill said this about the Whitfield Company Sound:

It is a versatile, rich, full-bodied, balanced choral tone that is motivated by a unique, bold confidence and dexterity normally found in a solo voice but mastered by an ensemble. The Whitfield Company is probably one of the most musically malleable gospel choirs ever.¹⁰⁴

McNeill’s sentiments echo the strivings of a number of gospel ensembles that formed in the ‘80s and ‘90s, influenced by the Whitfield Company. These include Donald Lawrence’s Tri-City Singers, Kurt Carr & the Kurt Carr Singers, Kirk Franklin & Family, and James Hall & Worship & Praise. Thomas Whitfield and his Company created the sound to be emulated amongst choral ensembles in contemporary gospel music.

Since its inception, the Whitfield Company has boasted some of the most accomplished musical talents Detroit had to offer. Many of the members were, like Whitfield, music directors at their respective churches. Donna Harris stated that Whitfield found the moniker “Company” to be imperative because it invited the “varied and diverse gifts” of the members into a “collaborative” and “inclusive” space.¹⁰⁵ Due to the heightened musical acumen of the singers, Whitfield was able to

¹⁰⁴ Dr. Tony McNeill, in discussion with the author, March 2019.

¹⁰⁵ Donna Harris in discussion with the author, September 2018. All subsequent statements by Harris are from this conversation.

imbue his creative vision in ways that were previously inaccessible to him. The Company, therefore, was the foremost aural emblem of the Whitfield Sound.

One of the major draws of the Company was its ability to sing what Donald Lawrence refers to as “unavailable tension.”¹⁰⁶ This Lawrence defined as Whitfield voicing the choir on a basic triad over extended harmonies in the accompanying instrumentation. One example of this tension occurs in Whitfield’s arrangement of “Down at the Cross,” wherein the Company outlines an A major triad over a G7 chord in the instrumentation (Ex. 3.1). Another happens in one of his original compositions, “With My Whole Heart.” The choir sings a root position F major triad over an extended A7 chord (Ex. 3.2).

Nearly every member’s capacity to sing these harmonies was tested by Whitfield before joining the Company. Aural skills were an integral part of the audition process, as Whitfield found it crucial that each singer had an independent ear to hear choral chord structures, which in the ‘70s and early ‘80s seemed almost in opposition to what he was playing.

The image shows a musical score for the song "Down at the Cross" starting at measure 59. It features a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line has lyrics: "cross, at the foot of the cross," with "S" above the first measure and "S, A, T" above the last measure. The piano part consists of two staves. Yellow highlights are placed on the vocal line and the piano accompaniment in the final measure, indicating "unavailable tension".

Example 3.1. “Down at the Cross,” mm. 59-63. “Unavailable tension” denoted in yellow. Arr. Thomas Whitfield © 1983 Bridgeport Music.

¹⁰⁶ Donald Lawrence in discussion with the author, July 2018. All subsequent statements by Lawrence are from this conversation.

Example 3.2. “With My Whole Heart,” mm. 9-11. “Unavailable tension” denoted in yellow.
Thomas Whitfield © 1983 Bridge Building Music.

Another aspect of the Company’s innovative sound was its extension of what Andrew Legg referred to as foundational gospel singing techniques.¹⁰⁷ The choir showcased an innate ability to sing highly dramatized yet equally balanced and tempered vocal “acrobatics,” such as swells and slides. In an example in “With My Whole Heart,” the crescendo marks represent vocal “swells,” which are often denoted by a widening of the vowel along with a heightening of volume (Ex. 3.3). The Company also normalized and made popular the use of the vocal slide in gospel music. Donald Lawrence notes that this was rarely, if ever, performed in gospel music before then. Such vocal techniques are more common in musical theatre performances amongst soloists and smaller cast ensembles. The most noted example of this happens in Whitfield’s second recorded setting of Robert Lowry’s hymn “Nothing but the Blood” (Ex. 3.4).

¹⁰⁷ Refer to Legg’s article “A Taxonomy of Musical Gesture in African American Gospel Music” for a more in-depth description of these techniques. Andrew Legg, “A Taxonomy of Musical Gesture in African American Gospel Music,” *Popular Music* 29, no. 1. (2010): 103-129.

Example 3.3. “With My Whole Heart,” mm. 6-8. Vocal swells represented by crescendo marks. Thomas Whitfield © 1983 Bridge Building Music.

Example 3.4. “Nothing but the Blood,” mm. 1-3. Vocal slides represented by tab slides in the second measure. Transcribed from recording.

Listening to the vocal slide in “Nothing but the Blood” on the *Alive and Satisfied* project, one can hear how the Company sings the upward slide in three-part harmony with calculated precision. This level of accuracy and cohesiveness, especially for choirs of that size, created a new standard for large ensemble singing in gospel music.

The “varied and diverse gifts” of the Company were perhaps most vividly represented in its cast of soloists. Names like Larry Edwards, Ron Kelly, Sandra Hudson, Gwen and Denise Morton, Wendy Davis, Lydia Wright, and JoAnn Hill Brown are as permanently engraved in the memories of

gospel music connoisseurs as the songs that Thomas Whitfield wrote and arranged for them. Theirs are the voices that brought to life Whitfield's ardent desires for his music and ministry.

Each of these singer's voices were undoubtedly unique. Larry Edwards, who sang with Whitfield even before the founding of the Company, is best remembered for his solo work on "Wrapped Up, Tied Up, Tangled Up."¹⁰⁸ Edwards's voice, almost baritonal in its warmth, was a vibrant tenor with an extensive upper range; this contrasted with the more youthful and lilting tenor timbre of Ron Kelly who sang solo on Whitfield's up-tempo setting of "Nothing but the Blood." For years Edwards and Kelly not only stood as the lead male vocalists of the Company but, along with other staunch tenor soloists like Michael Fletcher and Scott Bard-Mansur, embodied the heroic sound of the tenor section.

Soprano soloists such as Hudson and the Morton sisters were just as varied in vocal timbre. Sandra Hudson's tone was as luxurious as it was soulful in her soprano register. She recalled Whitfield writing "Healing Hands" for her to record on the *Hymn* project, as one of his brothers had fallen ill. He taught it to her in the studio while recording the project.¹⁰⁹ Whitfield, who when first hearing Hudson sing proclaimed that she would "sing for him forever," wrote for her another memorable lead on his setting of the Pentecostal hymn "Only a Look" on the *Alive and Satisfied* album. His inspiration to write was almost always connected to a particular voice. Most often that voice was Gwen Morton's.

As noted in the first chapter, Whitfield found Gwen to be his muse, often calling upon her to workshop through new songs he was writing. When asked what initially attracted her to his music,

¹⁰⁸ The song, recorded on the *I'm Encouraged* album, was written by John Askew but arranged and popularized by Whitfield and the Company.

¹⁰⁹ Sandra Hudson in conversation with the author, January 2018. All subsequent comments by Ms. Hudson are from this conversation.

she said that his style resembled the way in which she always sang when she was alone.¹¹⁰ The connectedness of the intimacy in his sound and her singing led to collaborative gems like “I’m Encouraged,” “Oh, Hallelujah,” and “I Shall Wear A Crown.” Gwen’s leads on songs such as these demonstrated not only the versatility of her singing but also the effect Whitfield’s writing had on her vocal styling. Prior to her tenure with the Company, her time with Dr. Mattie Moss-Clark and the Clark Sisters influenced more of a Pentecostal grit in her sound. Gwen joked that when Thomas first approached her he said he would often cringe at how hard she was singing with Dr. Clark. Morton’s solos with the Whitfield Company showcased a sweeter and more controlled sound in her voice, although she certainly never lost her edge in more powerful moments.

Gwen’s sister-in-law, Denise Morton, brought an almost anthemic nature to her gospel style. Her high-seated soprano voice, most notably found at the lead of a song Whitfield wrote specifically for her—“God Is On Our Side”—was a flexible, multi-octave display of gospel riffs and classical melismas. To hear her hauntingly beautiful obligato on Whitfield’s “Hold Me” is a testament to her ability to blend the classical and gospel influences in her singing.

The alto soloists were equally as diverse. Wendy Davis’s distinctive tone can be heard leading some of the Company’s most invigorating up-tempo songs like “Praise His Name,” “You Ought to Let the Joy Flow,” and “Higher Ground.” The combination of her warm middle range and reedy exterior timbre made for a powerhouse sound that exemplified the Pentecostal drive of Whitfield’s shout songs. The voice of JoAnn Hill Brown—the most often recorded soloist on the Company recordings—is present on every single album Thomas Whitfield recorded with the group. Brown recalled that she was Whitfield’s hymn singer.¹¹¹ “In our church it was the *Gospel Pearls*,” said Brown

¹¹⁰ Gwen Morton in conversation with the author, June 2018. All subsequent statements by Ms. Morton are from this conversation.

¹¹¹ JoAnn Hill Brown in conversation with the author, January 2018. All subsequent statements by Ms. Brown are from this conversation.

of her musical experience before joining the Company.¹¹² Singing those traditional hymns and gospel songs supplied her with the Baptist fervor that Whitfield had in mind for such songs as “I’ll Fly Away,” “That’s When He Saved My Soul,” “Go Tell It On The Mountain,” and Rudolph Stanfield’s setting of “Never Alone.” Even with the sometimes almost reckless abandon of her traditional gospel vocalism in the upper range, the smooth husk of Brown’s middle and lower registers made her a perfect fit for the contemporized hymn arrangements Whitfield set with her voice in mind.

Lydia Wright sang with a fervor that influenced a legion of choir soloists to follow. “I love [to hear] women that make me want to scream and snatch my wig off,” said Lillian Lloyd, noted soloist with Ricky Dillard & New Generation.¹¹³ Wright’s improvisational styling, as heard on “There Is Not a Friend,” contained both a religious fire and a jazzy bounce. Like Gwen Morton, Lydia found Whitfield’s new approach to gospel music to be a perfect fit for her less-than-traditional singing style.¹¹⁴ She also appreciated the creative freedom that he fostered among his soloists. “As much as we regarded him and respected the value he brought and the quality of his musicianship, he felt the same way about us.” Whitfield went so far as to allow Lydia to produce the vocals on his debut solo project, *Hold Me*. He also frequently called on her to overdub vocals on other albums he produced during the ‘80s. Wright was even entrusted to lend her voice to the now historic duet “Don’t Give Up On Jesus” with Keith Pringle when Vanessa Bell Armstrong, who was originally slated to record the song, was unable.

While each of the aforementioned soloists’ voices and singing styles could not be any more different than the other, at no time could their or any other’s individual voices be detected when

¹¹² *Gospel Pearls*, historically the first prominent compendium of Black gospel music, was a mainstay hymnal in the Black church.

¹¹³ Lillian Lloyd in conversation with the author, January 2018. All subsequent statements by Ms. Lloyd are from this conversation.

¹¹⁴ Lydia Wright in conversation with the author, March 2019. All subsequent statements by Ms. Wright are from this conversation.

singing in the Company. Whitfield's penchant for blend was unwavering, and as stated by many of the Company members, he achieved this through vowel unification. Lydia Wright noted that the Company's sound was birthed out of ensuring proper enunciation of vowel sounds. "It was like a whole new alphabet that he taught us," Scott Bard-Mansur recalled.¹¹⁵ As with more classically trained choral ensembles, Whitfield often had the Company warm up with various vocalises to further instill these techniques.

Donna Harris stated that in stark contrast to the larger massed choirs of the day, Whitfield desired to form an ensemble that was "intimate but strong." Harris continued that once the choir had accumulated about 45 singers he suspended auditions. Although the numbers were somewhat smaller than other prominent gospel choirs of the day, the Company never lacked strength in sound. Sandra Hudson recalled attending her first rehearsal with the Company and being amazed at how the choir was seated yet sang with the strength of a "full choir." "The same sound that came out when you were standing," recalled JoAnn Hill Brown, "was the same sound he wanted when you were sitting at the edge of your seat." Simply put, "their technique was phenomenal," said Donald Lawrence.

Lawrence, who attributed his concept of the Tri-City Singers to an urban contemporary version of the Whitfield Company, described the recipe for the sound of the choir:

One of the recipes of Tommy's choir was a lot of altos and tenors, and a little less on soprano. But the sopranos cut through. And it gave you that weight. So if you really notice, Tri-City has heavy alto. We have more tenors than anything. We have 16 tenors, about 12 altos, and sometimes about 10 sopranos. And again, that particular recipe gave me the weight that I love at the bottom of the choir, still making sure that the sopranos cut through. I really paid attention to how [Whitfield] constructed [the Company] and that was a model for me.

Extending from their vocal technique, one of the predominant factors that set the Company apart was its ability to maintain beauty of tone in the higher tessitura. Whitfield often voiced the choral

¹¹⁵ Scott Bard-Mansur in conversation with the author, December 2017.

parts in ranges that were largely inaccessible to most non-professional choirs. “We as altos often sang soprano,” JoAnn Hill-Brown remembered. “So where did that put sopranos? I don’t know.” Even so, Whitfield demanded a great deal of technical prowess from his singers. Donald Lawrence recalled some of the Company sopranos telling him that Whitfield admonished them that while the notes may be high, it had better not look like they were singing high.

If Whitfield was able to train the Company to sing with the cohesion of a more intimate ensemble, then his time working with his small group afforded him an even larger creative outlet. Byron Cage, credited by the gospel music industry as the Prince of Praise, traveled with Whitfield and the small group as a teenager. “I’ll never forget the joy I had singing with the likes of Ron Kelly, Michael Fletcher, Lydia Wright, Denise Morton and Faithe [Brooks] and Lateria Wooten.”¹¹⁶ Cage attributed much of his work with choirs and smaller ensembles to the model he experienced with Whitfield.

Lydia Wright noted that the idea for the small group initially formed because of a large number of out-of-state performance requests wherein Whitfield was financially unable to bring the entire Company. The concept extended as Whitfield regularly called upon the likes of Kelly, Fletcher, Wright, Brooks, and the Morton sisters to lend their voices to albums such as his *Hold Me*, Vanessa Bell Armstrong’s *Peace Be Still*, Keith Pringle’s *Perfect Peace*, and Yolanda Adams’s *Just As I Am*. With a smaller number of singers, Whitfield was able to further extend the level of precision he started with the Company. “The more intimate you make a thing,” Lydia Wright stated, “the tighter you can get it.” Studio sessions with the small group were as equally if not more rigorous than Company rehearsals. Vocal unisons, breathing onsets, consonant cutoffs and dynamic variances were hallmarks of Whitfield’s work with both ensembles. “We could be in the studio for an hour on

¹¹⁶ Byron Cage in conversation with the author, April 2018. All subsequent statements by Mr. Cage are from this conversation.

one line if we did not match,” Gwen Morton remembered. Whitfield’s small group set the template for Donald Lawrence’s intimate ensemble, aptly named Company. “My small group is just a smaller version of [Tri-City Singers],” said Lawrence, “and I think his small group was just a smaller version of the Whitfield Company.”

Tyrone Block, longtime director of the famed Milton Brunson’s Thompson Community Singers, referred to the sound of the Whitfield Company as “timeless.”¹¹⁷ “They were doing something different,” said Block. Indeed, the ensemble set a new trend for gospel choirs, and not only in terms of sound. The Company was one of the first to shed the longstanding tradition of wearing robes, as Whitfield regularly dressed the choir in matching formal attire for their concerts. The live studio recording concept, wherein Whitfield and the choir audibly responded to the music with spoken praise & worship as if at a live recording or concert, was also popularized via Company recordings. Perhaps the most intriguing component of the Whitfield Company sound was how deeply connected their singing was to Thomas’s playing. Donna Harris noted that while many musical organizations utilize the choir director as the creative lead, the Whitfield Company “wasn’t set up that way.” She continued that because Whitfield was the creator, he used the musical instrument at which he played—most often the organ—to create “that inspiration, and later, [creative] control.”

The Whitfield Company sound stands in organic collaboration with the Whitfield Sound. The elegance of their vocalism, rooted in the sophisticated style of Detroit gospel, was further bolstered by Whitfield’s technical determination and his revolutionary contemporizing of gospel harmony.

¹¹⁷ Tyrone Block in conversation with the author, January 2018.

Blending Gospel, Jazz, and Classicism

The intrinsic connectivity of the Whitfield Company and its creator is firmly rooted in Whitfield's playing. As a student of famed Detroit musicians Alfred Bolden, Herbert Pickard and Frank White, he developed a style of gospel piano and organ playing imbued with classical and jazz influences. Richard Smallwood, the formally trained pianist and composer noted for fusing classical idioms into his gospel style, stated that first and foremost, Whitfield was "an incredible pianist. He was one of the most amazing pianists around."¹¹⁸

Donald Lawrence exclaimed that when he first began studying Whitfield's music, he thought he was listening to someone play "with six or seven hands." "I think that he kind of channeled Oscar Peterson at the piano." Peterson, one of jazz music's most celebrated pianists, serves as a fitting influence on Whitfield's unparalleled use of extended harmonies in gospel music. Lawrence stated that while contemporaries like Andraé Crouch, Edwin and Walter Hawkins all benefited from jazz influences, Whitfield's stream of jazz extension in gospel was on another level. "He definitely was the forerunner for how I think most keyboard players play today," said Lawrence. "I would say ninety-five to ninety-nine percent of them."

Twinkie Clark, known as the Queen of the Hammond B-3 and one of contemporary gospel music's most celebrated pioneers, said this of Whitfield's impact on her music:

He's one of my favorites because of his ability to do contemporary style gospel music. He was doing things that you didn't hear any other musicians do. Whenever I would listen to Tommy's music, it would just inspire me. So what I started doing was when I would do my writing, I would always add something in there that I know he would do. For instance, two of the songs that me and the Clark Sisters do are "I'm Looking For A Miracle" and "I Tried Him And I Know Him." A lot of the improvisation and chord progressions that I used with those two songs I got straight from Tommy.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Richard Smallwood in conversation with the author, February 2018.

¹¹⁹ Twinkie Clark in conversation with the author, January 2018.

For the sheer volume of musical innovations he brought to gospel music, Whitfield accumulated a repertory of terms accredited to him that exemplified the Whitfield Sound. Chords with major jazz extensions became known as Whitfield chords. Whitfield turns detailed certain passing chord progressions that he regularly utilized in his compositions and arrangements. Even in terms of his songwriting—particularly found in his hymn settings—Whitfield revolutionized song structure with Whitfield intros, tags and vamps that progressed storyline in his writing. In essence, the Whitfield Sound redefined how composers and instrumentalists alike approached writing and playing gospel music.

V. Michael McKay is a celebrated songwriter of gospel music. He and Whitfield first met as collaborators on Yolanda Adams’s debut album. McKay was assigned to write the title track, “Just As I Am.” When asked about the impact of Whitfield’s writing, McKay said that it was evident that Thomas was “a friend to the hymnbook.”¹²⁰ While his original compositional output is significant, Whitfield’s arrangements of hymns perhaps best exemplify the totality of his creative imagination. His melodic, harmonic, and textual restructuring of these traditional hymns represent the presence of both classical and jazz influences in gospel music.

Almost all of Whitfield’s hymn arrangements follow a relatively specific format in structure, particularly those that were solo-led. Two of these arrangements, “Down at the Cross” and “Only a Look,” serve as examples. “Down at the Cross” is based on the Isaac Watts/Ralph Hudson hymn “Alas, and Did My Savior Bleed” (Ex. 3.5). Whitfield’s setting of “Only a Look,” while originally conceived by Anna Shepherd, is more directly connected to a gospelized rendering of the hymn arranged by Virginia Davis that was popularized by the pioneering traditional gospel group, the Roberta Martin Singers (Ex. 3.6 and 3.7).

¹²⁰ V. Michael McKay in conversation with the author, February 2018.

Alas! and Did My Savior Bleed

*There is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus;
Who gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time. 1 Tim. 2:5-6*

1. A - las! and did my Sav - ior bleed And did my Sov - 'reign die?
2. Was it for crimes that I had done He groaned up - on the tree?
3. Well might the sun in dark - ness hide And shut his glo - ries in,
4. Thus might I hide my blush - ing face While His dear cross ap - pears,
5. But drops of grief can ne'er re - pay The debt of love I owe:

Would He de - vote that sa - cred head For such a worm as I?
A - maz - ing pit - y! grace un - known! And love be - yond de - gree!
When Christ, the might - y Mak - er died, For man the crea - ture's sin.
Dis - solve my heart in thank - ful - ness, And melt my eyes to tears.
Here, Lord, I give my - self a - way, 'Tis all that I can do.

Refrain

At the cross, at the cross where I first saw the light, And the bur - den of my heart rolled a - way,
rolled a - way,

It was there by faith I re - ceived my sight, And now I am hap - py all the day!

WORDS: Isaac Watts, *pub.* 1707; *ref.* by Ralph E. Hudson, 1885. MUSIC: "Hudson"; R. E. H., 1885. Public Domain.

Example 3.5. "Alas! And Did My Savior Bleed." This hymn is commonly referred to as "At the Cross." Public Domain.

167 **Only a Look!**
 F. S. SHEPHERD. W. A. OGDEN.

1. On - ly a look at Je - sus! O soul bow'd down with sin,
 2. On - ly a look at Je - sus! O soul by care op - prest,
 3. On - ly a look at Je - sus! O soul, lift up thine eyes,

A look will give sal - va - tion, E - ter - nal life will win.
 A look at Christ, the Sav - ior, Will bring thee peace and rest.
 For soon the Lord will hail thee From mansions in the skies.

CHORUS.
 On - ly a look, on - ly a look, It is a sim - ple thing;
 Yet won - der - ful the bless - ing A look in faith will bring.

COPYRIGHT, 1914, BY HENRY DATE. 157

Example 3.6. "Only a Look," original hymn. Public Domain.

197 **Only a Look**
 Anna Shepherd
 A.S. Arr. by Virginia Davis

Moderate, with feeling

Verses
 1. On - ly a look at Je - sus, Oh, so bowed down with care,
 2. On - ly a look at Je - sus, He proves a con - stant friend,
 3. On - ly a look at Je - sus, Mer - ci - ful and true,

He has prom - ised to de - fend thee, He will all your bur - dens share.
 He will bring you peace and com - fort, He'll go with you to the end.
 Through the storms, through tri - als, He will lead you safe - ly through.

Copyright 1948 by Anna Shepherd.

Refrain
 On - ly a look, On - ly a look, Turn ye a - way... from sin...
 A look will bring sal - va - tion, E - ter - nal... life to win.

Example 3.7. "Only a Look," the gospel hymn arrangement. © 1948 Anna Shepherd.

The first audible hallmark of Whitfield’s hymn arrangements is the use of deliberately stylized intros. While most gospel music recordings before this time began by simply stating a later portion of the song, or even just rolling a chord, Whitfield regularly composed intros that more aptly set the framework for the piece. In his setting of “Down at the Cross,” we hear the intoning of a portion of the traditional hymn melody placed over Whitfield’s trademark jazz extensions (Ex. 3.8). As for “Only a Look,” he isolates a soprano line from the chorus (*Just one look at Jesus*), again reharmonizing with jazz-infused chords (Ex. 3.9).



Example 3.8. “Down at the Cross” introit. Melody intoned in the uppermost notes in the treble clef. Arr. Thomas Whitfield © 1983 Bridgeport Music.



Example 3.9. “Only a Look” introit. Isolated soprano line intoned in the uppermost notes in the treble clef. Transcribed from recording.

The second part of the song entails the lining of the verse melody. In the case of the two referenced arrangements, the soloist is isolated with instrumental accompaniment. The singer is careful to maintain the integrity of the hymn tune, albeit with slight improvisation. Whitfield reimagines the traditional chord structure, however, with a variety of extended harmonies (Ex. 3.10).

22

Would he —

27

de-vote that sa - cred

Example 3.10. “Down at the Cross,” mm. 22-31. Soloist lines the traditional verse melody with slight improvisation above reharmonized chord structure. Note the extreme extended harmony. Arr. Thomas Whitfield. © 1983 Bridgeport Music.

What occurs after the lining of the verse is pivotal to the song structure, as in this moment Whitfield transitions from arranger to composer. In both arrangements—wherein the traditional hymn chorus would usually follow—the choir inhabits the role of a Shakespearean chorus of sorts, providing musical commentary to what was previously stated by the soloist. Referring back to the refrain of Example 3.5, it is clear that Whitfield veers away from the traditional chorus in favor of new melodic, harmonic, and textual material (Ex. 3.11).

41
down—

S, A, T
Down at the cross!

41

45
There at the cross, Je-sus saw me,

50
changed me, washed me,

55
S, A, T
re-ar-ranged my des-ti-ny. Down at the

Example 3.11. “Down at the Cross,” chorus excerpt, mm. 41-58.
Arr. Thomas Whitfield. © 1983 Bridgeport Music.

In the chorus of “Only a Look,” Whitfield similarly creates new material, save for the final line of Virginia Davis’s gospel refrain (*Eternal life to win*) (Ex. 3.12).

The musical score is presented in four systems, each with a vocal line and a piano accompaniment (Pno.). The key signature is three flats (B-flat major/D minor). The time signature is 4/4. The lyrics are: "Just one look can move a moun-tain... Just one look turns night to day. Just... one look at Je-sus can save. E-ter-nal life to win! When we see Je-sus". The piano accompaniment features various textures, including triplets and block chords.

Example 3.12. “Only a Look,” chorus excerpt, mm. 38-54. Transcribed from recording.

The following section constitutes what is generally referred to as a Whitfield vamp. The extended ostinato form explores varied harmonic material that is characteristic of Whitfield’s writing. Several telling markers include the use of non-chord tones and stacked chords (Ex. 3.13).

Example 3.13. “Down at the Cross,” vamp excerpt, mm. 85-93.
 Arr. Thomas Whitfield. © 1983 Bridgeport Music.

Whitfield also popularized the use of passing chord sequences in gospel music. Perhaps the most significant occasion is found in the vamp of “Only a Look.” Herein he includes a brief instrumental interlude detailing a classically-infused secondary-dominant passing chord sequence that descends into a repetition of the choral vamp. This sequence is often referred to as the definitive Whitfield turn (Ex. 3.14).

Example 3.14. “Only a Look,” vamp excerpt. Note the Whitfield turn from mm. 108-109. Transcribed from recording.

In his dissertation, Dr. Raymond Wise categorized the major periods of gospel music from 1900 to 2000. He placed Thomas Whitfield at the helm of a list of pioneering composers and artists that comprised what Wise referred to as the Word/Ministry era of the 1980s and 1990s. Wise wrote that this era included “extended dominant chords (in all chords through a progression).” This progression, most often in Whitfield’s case, was “used in voicing chords that travel around a circle of fourths and fifths.”¹²¹ Whitfield frequently used circular progressions in his writing. One prominent example is found in the refrain of another of his hymn arrangements, “Oh, How I Love Jesus” (Ex. 3.15).

This progression in its fullest form is present in a number of Whitfield’s songs, including “God Wants Our Praises” from *Hallelujah Anyhow*, “Deliverance” from Yolanda Adams’s *Just As I Am* project, and his treatment of Rev. Charles Nicks’s “He’s Real” from Vanessa Bell Armstrong’s *Peace Be Still* album. While Whitfield adjusts the form slightly, the circular progression is still present

¹²¹ Raymond Wise, “On Teaching Students to Compose in the Gospel Genre: The Work of Raymond Wise,” in *Musicianship: Composing in Choir*, ed. Jody L. Kerchner and Katherine Strand (Chicago: GIA Publications, Inc., 2016), 210.

in the vamps of songs like “You Ought to Let the Joy Flow” from *The Annual Christmas Services*, “Praise His Name” from *I’m Encouraged*, and his arrangement of “His Eye Is On The Sparrow” from the *Hymn* album.

Example 3.15. “Oh, How I Love Jesus” refrain, mm. 1-5. Transcribed from recording.

Another trademark of Whitfield’s writing is found in the ending of “Down at the Cross” (Ex. 3.16). This definitive Whitfield outro places a through-composed melody over a pedal-tone progression utilizing suspended and diminished chords, as well as an augmented non-chord tone that is prevalent in his writing. The outro is heard in its clearest form at the end of “We Need a Word from the Lord” from his *My Faith* album (Ex. 3.17).

Whitfield even redefined the harmonic approach to the more up-tempo Pentecostal shout songs, fusing extended harmonies into the traditional gospel-blues form. His introit to “Praise His Name” begins with an almost jarring series of stacked and suspended chords before transitioning with a traditional gospel ascending progression to tonic as the choir enters (Ex. 3.18). For extra

measure, Whitfield created an instrumental shout progression of his own, clearly an homage to his mentor Alfred Bolden’s famed “Jesus” shout progression. The Whitfield shout is first heard via recording on “Let Everything Praise Him” from *Alive and Satisfied*. (Ex. 3.19).

Example 3.16 shows a musical score for the ending of "Down at the Cross". It features a vocal line starting at measure 119 with the lyrics "at the cross!". The vocal line is accompanied by a piano accompaniment. The key signature is three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat) and the time signature is 4/4. The piano accompaniment consists of chords and single notes in both hands.

Example 3.16. “Down at the Cross” ending. Condensed Whitfield outro from mm. 121-123. Arr. Thomas Whitfield. © 1983 Bridgeport Music.

Example 3.17 shows a piano accompaniment for the Whitfield outro. The key signature is three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat) and the time signature is 4/4. The piano part features a melodic line in the right hand and a harmonic accompaniment in the left hand. The melodic line includes an augmented non-chord tone in the second measure.

Example 3.17. Whitfield outro. Note the augmented non-chord tone in the second measure.

Example 3.18 shows a piano accompaniment for the "Praise His Name" intro. It consists of two systems of piano accompaniment. The key signature is three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat) and the time signature is 4/4. The piano part features a melodic line in the right hand and a harmonic accompaniment in the left hand. The melodic line includes an augmented non-chord tone in the second measure.

Example 3.18. “Praise His Name” intro, mm. 1-8. Transcribed from recording.



Example 3.19. Whitfield shout. Transcribed from recording.

The aural impact of Whitfield’s revelatory blending of gospel, jazz, and classicism in his writing has dominated the sound of gospel music for the past several decades. Inventive hymn arrangements such as Kurt Carr’s “Holy, Holy, Holy,” James Hall’s “The Blood,” and Donald Lawrence’s “Sweet Little Jesus Boy,” are clear descendants of the songwriting form Whitfield established in his hymn settings. Gospel instrumentalists have utilized many of his trademark creations, such as the Whitfield shout (Rudolph Stanfield’s “Hold On”), the Whitfield turn (Michael Fletcher’s “Everything I Need I Found in God”), and the Whitfield outro (Rodnie Bryant’s “We Offer Praise”). Kurt Carr even used the theme of a famous Whitfield vamp, from “Peace Be Still,” in his “Peace In the Midst of Your Storm.”

Gospel historian and critic Charles Clency wrote of Whitfield’s music as “a unique blend of lyricism, classicism, diatonicism, chromaticism, Pentecostal rhythmic fervor, and unusual harmonic stacking.”¹²² While what Whitfield introduced to gospel music was harmonically “unusual” in the late ‘70s and early ‘80s, it has become today’s norm. The Whitfield Sound is the harmonic vocabulary of contemporary gospel music.

¹²² Charles Clency in conversation with the author, March 2019.

Creating Symphonic Textures

Thomas Whitfield was an avid moviegoer. Such leisure served as his primary means of respite outside of a steadily busying music career. Whitfield, however, did not attend these movies simply for entertainment value:

I sit there and watch the screen and block out all the background music. Then I score it in my head. I'd love to do a movie score. To just sit down and watch a theme, then make the music to fit every mood and feeling, that would be a great challenge to me. I think that would be fantastic.¹²³

Whitfield's penchant for movie orchestration brought cinematic scope to gospel music. As Master Producer of the 1980s, his exhaustive volume of work during the decade led a revolution in innovative production techniques in gospel music recording as well as created new and inventive avenues for producers and instrumentalists alike.

When Whitfield began recording with the Company in the late '70s, Black gospel music had only recently begun to widen its purview to the use of instruments other than the piano, organ and occasional drum set. Seemingly secular instruments such as electric bass and guitar had long been a source of controversy in the gospel music genre and were just as of the past decade showing more of a presence in gospel music recordings. Even Whitfield's first album with the Company, *Brand New*, is relatively tame in terms of its use of instrumental lineup. Whitfield and early Company collaborator Rudolph Stanfield doubled on keyboards, backed by lead & rhythm guitars, bass, and percussion. There is, however, the presence of an ARP synthesizer—played by lead male soloist Larry Edwards—and a harp.¹²⁴

The first volume of the *Things That We Believe* project is certainly a firmer entry as it relates to Whitfield's inventive mind as an orchestrator. Even the album notes indicate this—Whitfield is

¹²³ Joyce Walker-Tyson, "The Whitfield sound is soaring high in heavenly music," *Detroit Free Press*, September 14, 1981, 8F.

¹²⁴ ARP, an American manufacturer of electronic musical instruments, became popular for their line of keyboard synthesizers that emerged in the early 1970s.

credited as conductor, orchestrator and arranger, along with playing both the acoustic and electric keyboards. The instrumental lineup in this album is expansive, with timpani, drums, rhythm and lead guitar, trumpet, trombone, congas and harp. Added to these is the use of “Special Moog Effects.”¹²⁵

From the very opening of the album, Whitfield creates a scene reminiscent of a cinematic prelude. “Dawn of Hope” begins with a lone note intoned by a string patch on the synthesizer before being joined by wind sound effects. Soon after, the trumpeter enters along with the bass, presenting a semi-ostinato foundation as the other instruments enter to build momentum. The choir comes in at the peak of the piece, vocalizing an anthemic melody on a classically rounded “ah” as the synthesized symphonic texture surrounds them. As the prelude dies down, the wind sound effects resume, seamlessly transitioning into the first formal song of the album, “This is My Prayer.”

“Dawn of Hope” represents a move in a new direction in terms of a gospel music production. While the use of synthesizers was not entirely unprecedented—Crouch, Cleveland, and the Hawkines utilized them in their respective projects—Whitfield broadened the concept to encompass more symphonic textures in his writing. As Crouch’s music took a turn towards the Contemporary Christian side with more funk and soul infused sources, Whitfield created an aural world imbued with classicized and jazz-tinged influences that were still firmly rooted in gospel music.

Things That We Believe, Vols. 1 & 2 represents a balancing of the performative and creative partnership of voice and instrument in gospel music. Whitfield places brief instrumental interludes (“Reflect”) in both volumes. These interludes constitute another hallmark of the Whitfield Sound, granting more improvisatory license to the band. “Saints in Flight” from the *My Faith* album is a three-and-a-half-minute straight-ahead jazz piece solely featuring the band. “Oft Times and

¹²⁵ Moog, another American manufacturer of electronic musical instruments, developed the Minimoog in 1970. It became one of the most impactful instruments in the field.

Wonders” from *Alive and Satisfied* is also purely instrumental, albeit more of a thematic reprise of the vamp from an earlier track, “Oh, Hallelujah.”

During the 1980s, Whitfield reached a zenith level of exploratory genius in terms of production quality. Dr. Birgitta Johnson wrote:

By the mid-eighties Whitfield was fully utilizing MIDI sequencers, the most significant development in synthesizer technology at that time. His pioneering use of MIDI synthesizers in gospel also helped to define the Whitfield Sound. With MIDI synthesizers, Whitfield could incorporate string sound presets and the variety of electric keyboard sounds already popular in secular music (e.g., the clavinet, Moog, strings, horns, percussion, and sound effects).¹²⁶

Early ‘80s projects such as *Hold Me*, Armstrong’s *Peace Be Still*, Adams’s *Just As I Am*, and Pringle’s *Perfect Peace* cemented Whitfield’s status as a sought-after producer whose exploration of sound influenced gospel music production standards for years to come. Whether it be the lush string and E.P. underlay in *Hold Me*’s “Psalms,” the stormy and rushing wind effect that prefaces “Peace Be Still,” the jazz-infused sax and bell melody that begins *Just As I Am*’s “I Am,” or the haunting horn entrance of “Perfect Peace,” the Whitfield Sound was formed in part as a result of the unmistakable aural sensation that presented itself when any album he produced was played.

This is perhaps most crucial when considering the albums he produced for artists other than himself and the Company. As distinctive as the Whitfield Sound is, it never overtook the unique sound of each artist with whom he worked. Artists such as Vanessa Bell Armstrong, Yolanda Adams, Keith Pringle and Bishop Paul Morton were all able to carve out a style of their own under Whitfield’s guidance. “He got into the heart of the artist,” said Donald Lawrence. “He knew how to find it, and he even matched them with the right song. Once he found the right song, he put his arrangement to it, and gave them the space to sing. There was just nothing like it.”

¹²⁶ Birgitta Johnson, “Oh, For A Thousand Tongues to Sing: Music and Worship in African American Megachurches of Los Angeles, California” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 2008), 295.

The presence of space was a pertinent element in Whitfield's production. This was a clear extension from his work as a collaborative pianist. For gospel music producer Stanley Brown, it was Whitfield's playing for Vanessa Bell Armstrong on "Nobody But Jesus" that taught him "the importance of space."¹²⁷ That same concept translated into how Whitfield produced music for his artists. "With the background vocals, the arrangements, the approach to chords and progressions," said Lawrence, "you knew that it was Whitfield." Lawrence was clear to state, however, that it was "Whitfield with them, not Whitfield on them. That's the whole thing about being a great producer."

Steven Ford likened Whitfield's gift as a consummate producer to the relationship between language and dialect. For all of the varied artists with whom he worked, Ford stated that "Thomas was able to change dialect, although we understood it was his language."¹²⁸ As the Master Producer, Whitfield influenced not only the way gospel music producers approach the inclusion of sound but also the placement of it. He is the Father of Modern Gospel Music Production.

Deepening of Intimacy in Gospel Song Lyrics

*Oh, my saints you forget how to call me by name...
When you sing or you preach of the one who is real...
Is it shame or for fame that you push me away...
Can you know how I feel that I died so you might live today...
Just in case you've forgotten my name...
It's Jesus...
I'm Jesus Christ.*

These lyrics were penned by Whitfield in response to a heartfelt conversation with Gwen Morton about his place in gospel music ministry. They belong to a song entitled "Just In Case You've Forgotten." Kirk Franklin stated that the lyrics felt "very romantic, like God was a person that was

¹²⁷ Stanley Brown in discussion with the author, January 2018.

¹²⁸ Steven Ford in discussion with the author, February 2018. All subsequent statements by Mr. Ford are from this discussion.

affected by our rejection.”¹²⁹ Franklin, arguably gospel music’s most popular figure to date, said that “When I’m getting ready to go onstage or to undertake a life-changing event, I’ll listen to it in my headphones because it helps me focus, and reminds me of what it is I do and why I do it.”¹³⁰

The personification and romanticism of Jesus Christ in gospel song lyrics was revelatory even in 1991, when the song was first released at the tail end of Whitfield’s *My Faith* album.¹³¹ Whitfield, nearing the end of his life, experienced a career-long transformation not only in his music but in his lyricism. The texts he penned became as elevated as the harmonies he wrote. This departure from traditional Black church rhetoric affirmed Whitfield’s position as forerunner in Black praise and worship music.

*Precious Jesus, now I love you...
How I lift high my voice with your praise...
Holy Spirit, I implore thee...
Drench my heart as my lips bark your praise...
I am persuaded, Lord to love you...
I have been changed to bless your name...
I am constrained by this great gospel...
Forever to worship thee.*

Dr. Deborah Smith Pollard, who specializes in African American Literature and Culture, among many other things, said that Whitfield grabbed her attention when he began to use words such as “extol” and “constrained” in his lyrics. “This is not *‘He picked me up and turned me around,’*” said Pollard. She had not previously heard such words used in gospel music. “Precious Jesus,” from the *Alive and Satisfied* album, has become one of the genre’s defining praise and worship anthems. The

¹²⁹ Adelle Platon, “Kirk Franklin on Gospel Music’s Past, Present & Future,” *Tidal* online, February 12, 2018, <http://read.tidal.com/article/black-history-month-2018-kirk-franklin-past-present-future>.

¹³⁰ Roy Trakin, “Kirk Franklin: The Message of “Why,” Lyrics & Stevie Wonder,” Recording Academy Grammy Awards online, September 5, 2017, <https://www.grammy.com/grammys/news/kirk-franklin-message-why-lyrics-stevie-wonder>.

¹³¹ Whitfield recorded the song again as the penultimate track on *Alive and Satisfied*. This time he performed it as a vocal solo.

text, however, is more than a simple declaration. Lyrics like “*now I love you*” and “*I have been changed*” illustrate a journey to relationship with Christ.

Donald Lawrence noted that the way Whitfield set lyrics was often “visual, and very storytelling.” Lawrence, who is also appreciated for the deep sensitivity of his lyrics, accredited his passion for text to musical theatre lyricists such as Oscar Hammerstein and Stephen Sondheim. “They painted pictures with their lyrics.” Lawrence called Whitfield a “great picture painter with his lyrics.” In “Precious Jesus,” Lawrence said “you could almost see yourself standing there in the scene talking to God, the way he wrote the lyrics.”

*Hold me, when I feel my every foe...
Hold me, when my heart is getting cold...
Hold me, when I just don't understand...
Hold me, and I won't let go Your hand...
I want to rest in You.*

Donald Lawrence related the text of “Hold Me” to that of a theatrical monologue. Even though the actor is alone on the stage, it is generally clear to whom he or she is speaking. Lawrence defined praise and worship as “singing to God and telling Him how you feel about Him...that conversation between the two of you.” What he appreciated about Whitfield’s approach to the genre is that “he did it based on his heart.” In that sense, the intimacy of his lyricism was such that he invited the listener into his communication with God. Essentially, we are witnessing his personal relationship through his music.

Bishop Yvette Flunder, a founding voice in the development of contemporary gospel music and close collaborator with the Hawkins Family, said she loved the way Whitfield “sang passionately about his love for Jesus.”¹³² “It wasn’t religious,” Flunder admonished. “It was a personal relationship.” Whitfield, who was initially hesitant about singing, became known for his fervent and

¹³² Bishop Yvette Flunder in discussion with the author, August 2018. All subsequent statements by Ms. Flunder are from this discussion.

impassioned vocalism. “Hold Me” features him as the vocal lead, a rare occurrence even on his solo projects. As a precursor to praise and worship music, Flunder said that with songs like “Hold Me” and “We Need a Word from the Lord” Whitfield “dared to be intimate in his worship with God, and that crosses a line that moves us beyond fear.” While the majority of gospel music songs/works beforehand were more eschatological in nature, Whitfield wrote songs that “talked to God, and talked about intimacy. They were songs that you could only sing if you truly believed that you were loved by God.” Flunder referred to his songs as “prayer with wings.”

Hallelujah, Anyhow...
Hallelujah, Anyhow.
Just keep on praising Him...
Hallelujah, Anyhow.

Gospel recording artist Earnest Pugh remembered Whitfield telling him that “in bad times, people need to hear good news.”¹³³ “When I take my pen out and I write,” Whitfield told him, “I’m giving them answers to all of the questions that are out there.” Whitfield, who experienced the tragedy of losing a brother to murder around the time that he wrote “Hallelujah, Anyhow,” penned a simple response to his painful query.

Lillian Lloyd stated that Whitfield “made us become lovers of God even the more just on his testimony.” Extending from the narrative gifts of his mentor Rev. James Cleveland, Whitfield often introduced an aura of worship in his narrations, exhorting the audience in a participatory communion. Lloyd recounted Whitfield’s prefacing narration to “Hallelujah, Anyhow”:

After I kept walking with the Lord and walking with Him and walking with Him...I learned that a few trials would come. A few things would try to take me off course. But there was one word that he put deep in my ‘members. He put the word ‘Hallelujah.’

Here Whitfield’s lyricism explores the depth of simplicity. Dr. Birgitta Johnson wrote that his “praise and worship music includes the congregational singing which calls for more unison parts and simple

¹³³ Earnest Pugh in discussion with the author, March 2018. All subsequent statements by Mr. Pugh are from this discussion.

melodies that encourage communal participation.”¹³⁴ The narrative efforts of Whitfield encouraged the vertically motivated worship associated with the developing form at that time. Johnson continued in noting that Whitfield “was the first to write praise and worship music for large gospel choirs.”¹³⁵ Songs like “Hallelujah, Anyhow,” “Precious Jesus/Worship Overture” and “Dear Jesus” are examples of Company tracks that introduced praise and worship to the Black church community.

*Dear Jesus, Son of the Living God...
We extol You, and adore You...
Dear Jesus...
Oh, Jesus...
You have my praise.*

JoAnn Hill Brown said that she once believed that all lyrical content in music had to rhyme until Whitfield penned “Dear Jesus.” When this statement was presented to Steven Ford, he likened Whitfield’s writing to that of German lieder. In lieder, Ford maintained that the lyrical content is “foremost.” “It was poetry without rhyme,” Ford said. In the recording of “Dear Jesus,” Whitfield precludes with a stirring piano introduction before singing the first two runs of the song. The choir enters afterwards, singing the same refrain for several turns before Whitfield invites the audience to participate. “Dear Jesus” is intriguing not only because of the choice of text but also because of the rhythmic underlay of the lyrics. Whitfield presents the text in a classicized recitative form, and the choir follows suit. The speech-liked nature of recitative further enhances the concept of the conversational nature of Whitfield’s lyricism.

Whitfield often transitioned from the conversational nature of his music to promoting spoken communication with God during concerts and recordings. Yolanda Adams, who toured with Whitfield and the Company for a time after the release of her debut album, spoke about how when

¹³⁴ Johnson, 293.

¹³⁵ Johnson, 293.

Whitfield began to exhort there was a “different type of atmosphere forming.”¹³⁶ Adams noted that Whitfield’s conversational nature with audiences about their relationship with God was a radical concept in the ‘80s. Whitfield encouraged the enhancement of personal intimacy in worship throughout the song and afterwards. Dr. Birgitta Johnson wrote that Whitfield included worship interludes on several of his albums, including “Sacrifices of Praise” from *Hallelujah Anyhow*. Johnson notes that the track “consists of the audience and choir engaged in collective improvisation and musical praise over a pedal point in D-flat major held by the band.”¹³⁷ With the live studio concept that Whitfield introduced to gospel music, he was able to recreate the worship aesthetic at the end of songs such as “Precious Jesus/Worship Overture” and “His Eye Is On The Sparrow.”

*We don't need another political uprising...
We don't need another conqueror on the scene...
What we need is a special word that will burn within our hearts...
And give us direction from above...
We need a word from the Lord.*

A 1990 Detroit Free Press article interviewed Ronald Winans (The Winans), Michael Brooks (Commissioned), and Thomas Whitfield. These three represented the wave of contemporary gospel music that flooded the city of Detroit during the ‘80s. Michael Brooks commented upon the change in gospel music lyrics happening during this time. “If a gospel artist records a song that says Jesus Christ too much, then that song becomes an issue,” said Brooks. “Record companies say it’s too preachy and radio stations will say it’s too strong.”¹³⁸

In an attempt to make gospel music more palatable to nontraditional churchgoers, composers began to utilize more indefinite pronouns in their writing, such as *he*, *you*, and *it*. It was certainly not uncommon for one to listen to the radio during the 80s and 90s, and to become

¹³⁶ Yolanda Adams in discussion with the author, March 2018.

¹³⁷ Johnson, 293.

¹³⁸ Nichole M. Christian, “Gospel moves out of the churches into the mainstream,” *Detroit Free Press*, December 16, 1990, 9Q.

completely enraptured by a song without any knowledge of the piece's undergirding lyrical intent. Many of contemporary gospel's most famous artists often found their music played in clubs and other more secularly themed venues.

Whitfield, whose lyrical content never wavered in its staunch presentation, responded to the artistic conundrum:

Gospel songs say things that people who have problems can take home with them. People who feel as if their lives have no purpose used to be able to hold on to a gospel song. It was something that gave you hope until your prayers were answered. If gospel lyrics and songs do not relay that same sense of hope and peace, then we are failing. If we lose the hope, then we've lost the purity of gospel music.¹³⁹

Songs such as "We Need a Word from the Lord," "With My Whole Heart," and "Lift Those Hands and Bless Him" may have certainly blurred the already amorphous line between gospel and Black praise and worship music, especially during a time when the term "praise and worship" was not fully realized in the Black church. Regardless of category, however, Whitfield's lyrics remained pure whether they were "mountain high" or "valley low" in concept. Lyricism as it relates to textual considerations is just as much a part of the music-making process as is singing and playing. The Whitfield Sound is audible proof of such.

Conclusions

For all of the genre defining work of his contemporaries, such as Andraé Crouch, Walter and Edwin Hawkins, only Thomas Whitfield's name invokes an aural vocabulary that distinctly details his sound. The Whitfield Company helped to define the sound with an unprecedented level of technique, detail and precision in gospel music choirs. Whitfield further developed the sound with his inventive blending of gospel, jazz, and classical harmonies, progressions, and forms. As the Master Producer, Whitfield created symphonic textures in gospel music that developed not only his

¹³⁹ Christian, "Gospel moves."

own distinctive sound, but also that of artists such as Vanessa Bell Armstrong and Yolanda Adams. Finally, Whitfield's art-song-like interpretation of lyricism unveiled the intimacy of gospel music, setting the stage for Black praise and worship. Earl Wright, Jr., Whitfield's longtime musical collaborator, wrote this of the Whitfield Sound:

In its completed form, it became a prophetically timeless spiritual music and choral worship expression that went straight to the heart, bypassing words, arrangements and notes! It's not what we hear, it's what we feel! The Whitfield Sound became the outward worship expression of the gift that God planted deep, deep down in the soul of my friend and bro, Min. Thomas A. Whitfield. Gone but not forgotten!¹⁴⁰

¹⁴⁰ Earl Wright, Jr. in conversation with the author, March 2019.

CHAPTER FOUR

SPHERE OF INFLUENCE

The potency of this document would be severely lessened without the wise counsel of those interviewed during this near three-year-long process. Even with the diverse gifts and backgrounds represented by the interviewees, they share the common thread of Thomas Whitfield's impact on their lives and careers. Whitfield did not witness in his lifetime the full scope of his impact on gospel music. However, this brief but impactful compendium of quotes gathered in conversation with some of the genre's most prominent figures should further strengthen this dissertation's intent to cement Whitfield's position as the Dean of Contemporary Gospel Music.

Fred Hammond

Hammond, a Detroit native, was a founding member of one of urban contemporary gospel music's trailblazing ensembles: Commissioned. After his tenure with Commissioned, he worked with a choir known as Radical for Christ, ushering in a new era of what is called urban praise and worship, of which he is credited as the defining architect. As a young musician, Hammond recalled sitting in the studio watching Thomas Whitfield working on Vanessa Bell Armstrong's album:

I prayed one prayer one day. I was watching [Whitfield] play the piano. He was doing something in the studio. And I said one thing. I said "Lord, teach me how he thinks." And I was able to glean from how he thought. It was one of the most amazing influences of my life. My very first record was called *I Am Persuaded*. And [Whitfield] came to me, and said: "There are two records that are my favorite in the world. And that's Stevie Wonder and *I Am Persuaded*." He said "Where did you get that from?" I told him "I got it from you."¹⁴¹

¹⁴¹ Fred Hammond in discussion with the author, October 2018.

Byron Cage

Known in the gospel music industry as the “Prince of Praise,” Michigander Byron Cage carried the mantle of Whitfield by further popularizing praise and worship music in the Black church. Albums with his smaller group, Purpose, such as *Transparent in Your Presence* and *Dwell Among Us*, were among the first to be completely devoted to praise and worship. His recording of Kurt Carr’s “The Presence of the Lord Is Here” is noted for introducing the world to the contemporary worship song. Cage, who met Whitfield in Detroit at Greater Grace Temple, spoke about Thomas’s impact on his music:

Thomas taught us how to be poetic and spiritual, and still allow the message to make sense without being too spooky. I always vowed that I would always keep him in the forefront of my mind as one the people who influenced me in gospel music the most.¹⁴²

Donald Lawrence

Lawrence, the multiple Grammy and Stellar award-winning songwriter, producer, and choirmaster, is credited for helping to develop urban contemporary gospel music. Through his work with the Tri-City Singers and his smaller group, Company, Lawrence expanded upon the detail and precision of gospel choral singing that Whitfield introduced with his vocal ensembles. Lawrence is often seen as closest in musical resemblance to Whitfield in terms of his compositional style. He ended our discussion with his thoughts on Whitfield’s impact on him and all of gospel music:

I just want everybody to know that he’s definitely one of the shoulders that I stand on. If they don’t know his music...if they don’t know his skill set as a musician...I challenge everybody to go back and do the research and study all of what Thomas Whitfield did, because he was definitely a forerunner. And one of the reasons why musicians play the way they play now is due to the fact that Tom Whitfield took the chance on extended chords against the traditional gospel sound. Those two textures together gave us the Whitfield Sound.¹⁴³

¹⁴² Byron Cage in discussion with the author, February 2018.

¹⁴³ Donald Lawrence in discussion with the author, July 2018.

Earnest Pugh

The multi-octave-singing gospel recording artist started his career as a member of the late O'landa Draper's choir, the Associates. A devoted fan of Vanessa Bell Armstrong and Daryl Coley, Pugh forged a solo career with his first album entitled *A Worshipper's Perspective*. The radio single was a cover of one of the Whitfield Company's most popular songs, "Wrapped Up, Tied Up, Tangled Up." Pugh has since covered Whitfield's arrangement of "Walk in the Light" and the Rudolph Stanfield tune that Whitfield originally produced for Keith Pringle, "Perfect Peace." He spoke on the necessity of keeping Whitfield's music alive:

If [people] would go back and understand the foundation of gospel music...the shoulders we stand on. People like Thomas Whitfield. It would do people some good to sit with those records and listen to the conversation that Thomas was having [with God]. Thomas was conveying a message that one can only have after being in the presence of God.¹⁴⁴

Percy Bady

Composer of such songs as "In My Name," "There Is No Way," and "I Believe I Can Fly," Percy Bady has enjoyed a genre-spanning career as a keyboardist, songwriter, and producer. When Bady and Darius Brooks joined Rev. Milton Brunson's Thompson Community Singers, they fused contemporary style into the choir's traditional foundation, inspiring the surge of contemporary gospel in Chicago. He spoke on Whitfield's impact on gospel keyboarding:

[Whitfield] was the Maestro. For real. He found a way to make playing gospel interesting and fun, but it still felt like church. It would stretch you. [His music] was the catalyst to make me take mine to a whole 'nother level.¹⁴⁵

Darius Brooks

Along with Bady, Darius Brooks penned some of the Thompson Community Singers's most enduring tunes, including "Safe In His Arms," "For the Good of Them," "Jesus Rose," and "My

¹⁴⁴ Earnest Pugh in discussion with the author, March 2018.

¹⁴⁵ Percy Bady in discussion with the author, January 2018.

Mind's Made Up." Brooks, a close friend of Whitfield's, was to be his best man at his wedding. He spoke about his friendship with Whitfield and the impact Thomas had on his writing:

On October 10th, I was preparing to be my friend's best man at his wedding. I will never forget this date. [Whitfield] taught me how to listen to great music. "Darius, don't critique it. Listen to the pen of the writer's heart. Music is heard with the ear, but understood with the heart."¹⁴⁶

Cedric Dent

Cedric Dent, another Detroit native, was one of the founding members of the ten-time GRAMMY award-winning vocal group, TAKE 6. He was also a major contributor to the GRAMMY award-winning *Handel's Messiah: A Soulful Celebration* album, one of Whitfield's last projects before his passing. Dent spoke about Whitfield's influence on his work:

While there are several musicians that have impacted my musical development, I can honestly say none have influenced my music more than Thomas Whitfield! I was classically trained until I was introduced to his music as an undergrad in college. I didn't grow up listening to gospel music, and his work was the first to pique my interest in the style. It forever changed the trajectory of my musical development.¹⁴⁷

Richard Smallwood

Songs such as "Total Praise," "I Love the Lord," and "Anthem of Praise" have cemented Richard Smallwood's status as luminary of gospel music. As a classically trained pianist he is notable for his impeccable blending of classical influences into the traditional gospel style. From his work with the Richard Smallwood Singers to the larger ensemble Vision, Smallwood has established himself as a gifted pianist, songwriter, and choirmaster. While in conversation with Smallwood, he spoke about his first experience producing an album. Smallwood began his second record with the Richard Smallwood Singers, *Psalms* (1984), with some doubt as he was nervous about producing for the first time. The record company sent in Thomas Whitfield to encourage him. Whitfield mentored

¹⁴⁶ Darius Brooks in discussion with the author, March 2019.

¹⁴⁷ Cedric Dent in discussion with the author, November 2017.

him during that process, even playing organ on several of the tracks. Smallwood spoke of his appreciation for Whitfield:

Although I was older than [him], I always called him “Uncle Tommy” because I respected who he was and certainly the musical genius he was.¹⁴⁸

Rick Robinson

The Chicago native is a prominent songwriter, keyboardist and producer in the gospel music industry. The composer of the popular contemporary worship song, “More Than Anything,” Robinson has collaborated with the likes of Ricky Dillard, Bishop Larry Trotter, Lamar Campbell and Jonathan Nelson. He is currently musical director for his wife, gospel recording artist Anita Wilson. As a young boy, Robinson was a member of the famed Chicago-based choir Walt Whitman & the Soul Children of Chicago. He recalled performing at the June 1992 Gospel fest in Chicago, the same concert at which Whitfield and Company performed a week before his passing. Robinson accidentally stumbled into Whitfield’s tent, meeting him for the first and last time. Rick spoke about the impact of Whitfield’s music:

I’ve always been a fan of Detroit music. If you can play in Detroit or Chicago, you can play anywhere in the world. I think that the Detroit school of [gospel] music is divided into two categories: Thomas Whitfield and Twinkie Clark.¹⁴⁹

Stanley Brown

Stanley Brown has enjoyed a career collaborating with a diverse list of artists, from Bishop T.D. Jakes and Hezekiah Walker to Snoop Dogg and Run DMC. In the gospel realm his work with artists such as Bishop Jakes, Karen Clark Sheard and Hezekiah Walker has made him a visionary in the Christian music market. Brown spoke about Whitfield’s impact on his music making:

¹⁴⁸ Richard Smallwood in discussion with the author, February 2018.

¹⁴⁹ Rick Robinson in discussion with the author, January 2018.

What was really life changing to me was [Whitfield's] *Hold Me* album. That to me was a game changer. That was an album that I wish today's musicians would just shed...just sit down and learn every song. Just his approach musically, and the mastery of him just sitting at a grand piano...and the voicings. That album was something that really influenced me musically.¹⁵⁰

Steven Ford

While Ford is perhaps best known for his collaborative work with Richard Smallwood, the GRAMMY, Dove and Stellar award-winning keyboardist and producer has worked with a myriad of gospel artists, from the Winans to John P. Kee to Shirley Caesar. He has also worked as music director for several Broadway stage productions. Ford spoke on Whitfield's legacy:

Everyone that came after [Whitfield] has been trying to emulate to the best of our ability what he did.¹⁵¹

Tony Walker

Tony Walker's skill as a classically trained pianist versed in a multitude of genres has made him a veritable collaborator for a list of artists as varied as Stevie Wonder to Ledisi to Richard Smallwood. Walker said this about his gospel music influences:

For me, it was all about Richard Smallwood and Thomas Whitfield. They shaped my perspective on what hip gospel music was.¹⁵²

Trent Phillips

Phillips, one of gospel music's most noted keyboardists, music directors and producers, has maintained a career working with some of the industry's most celebrated artists. Outside of this, he regularly serves as a mentor and consultant in music ministry. When asked what he thought the industry would be like if Whitfield were still alive, he said this:

¹⁵⁰ Stanley Brown in discussion with the author, January 2018.

¹⁵¹ Steven Ford in discussion with the author, February 2018.

¹⁵² Tony Walker in discussion with the author, January 2018.

I think there would be such a richness. This is not just from the playing perspective or the producing perspective, but writing as well. The depth of the lyric content...stuff that would make you think, stuff that would make you cry.¹⁵³

Twinkie Clark

The Godmother of Contemporary Gospel, Clark revolutionized the way we approach gospel music. As the Queen of the Hammond B-3, she influenced a legion of contemporary gospel organists. Songs from her pen, including “You Brought the Sunshine,” “Pure Gold” and “Lord, Give Me a Praying Spirit,” extended the signature sound of Detroit gospel and led songwriting into a new era. Clark reflected on the impact of her dear friend:

His music was so beautiful, sometimes it would bring tears to my eyes. Those that thought his music to be too jazzy, too contemporary, or having too much secular sound...they misunderstood him. What he was doing was setting a trend, and bringing a new era of gospel music.¹⁵⁴

V. Michael McKay

McKay is one of gospel music’s most celebrated songwriters. From “The Battle is the Lord’s” to “The Potter’s House” to “All in His Hands,” McKay has been at the forefront of contemporary gospel songwriting for decades. He described the intellectual nature of Whitfield’s music:

I often say that Christianity is a thinking man’s religion. [Whitfield’s] music invoked thought. It’s not something that was just so easily understood. He made you think about it. When he did it, you were compelled to embrace it with the mind. It was a holy matrimony between words and music. There was a great marriage. And while it was intriguing and interesting, it captured the sound of what we call the church. His music was to church music like Mozart was to the classics. His music spoke to who he was...a churchman.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵³ Trent Phillips in discussion with the author, January 2018.

¹⁵⁴ Twinkie Clark in discussion with the author, January 2018.

¹⁵⁵ V. Michael McKay in discussion with the author, February 2018.

Dr. Bobby Jones

With his long-running show “Bobby Jones Gospel,” Jones provided a significant level of performance opportunities for gospel artists. He and the show became mainstays in the viewership and consumption of gospel music for over thirty years. Dr. Jones talked about Whitfield’s entry into the public eye of gospel:

There was a comparative style that intrigued me the most...similar to Edwin Hawkins. But yet there was a taste of Charles Nicks and James Cleveland. He gave us a range of ways to praise and worship God. Thomas Whitfield was leading everybody to the contemporary side. He changed from the standard element to a creative element. He became a staple in our community.¹⁵⁶

Jonathan Dubose, Jr.

Dubose, known as the Prophesying Guitarist, is perhaps gospel music’s most celebrated and recorded lead guitarist. His work with Walter Hawkins and the Love Center Choir on the numerous *Love Alive* recordings helped to create an aural dynasty in gospel music. Outside of gospel music he has been a longtime collaborator with Harry Connick, Jr. Dubose was a close friend and collaborator of Whitfield’s, often staying at his home when he was in Detroit. His musings on Whitfield bring a fitting close to this chapter:

[Whitfield] contributed so much not only to gospel music but to American music. He introduced a new form to us. His music is a prescription. That’s the best way I can put it. He provided a prescription to get you healed, saved and delivered.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶ Dr. Bobby Jones in discussion with the author, February 2018.

¹⁵⁷ Jonathan DuBose, Jr. in discussion with the author, July 2018.

CONCLUSIONS

Thomas was multifarious. Generous, humorous, introspective, moody, creative, otherworldly, and inspirational, all at the same time. Such is the stuff of genius. He suffered under the weight of that awesome mantle, but today the world is richer because of his legacy, a labor of love at its finest.

- Darryl Ford

One of the greatest tragedies of Thomas Whitfield's untimely death was the loss of a creative genius that had yet to be fully realized. As in the case of most artists whose work is before their time, Whitfield struggled to define his place in gospel music. The truth of the matter is that neither he nor his art were designed to fit that frame. Whitfield, subsequently, became as large as his gift. The physical pressures of his weight brought about his mortal demise but the enormity of his gift extended his legacy into immortality.

Thomas Whitfield, the Dean of Contemporary Gospel Music, displayed a unique gift from an early age. His experiences with the Beverly Glenn Chorale and the Voices of Tabernacle further prepared him to take his own creative license and form the Thomas Whitfield Company. With this musically astute aggregation of singers, Whitfield initiated his distinct style. During the 1980s he extended his sound through solo projects and introduced and developed the sounds of some of gospel music's most celebrated artists, from Vanessa Bell Armstrong and Yolanda Adams to Keith Pringle and Bishop Paul Morton. For the detail and precision he brought to gospel music, he became known as the Maestro and the Master Producer.

Whitfield was a consummate student of music and always willing to learn. Primary to his musical growth was his rearing in Detroit, the city often considered the Gospel Music Capital of the World. He gleaned artistic inspiration from a number of influential figures including Alfred Bolden,

Herbert Pickard, Rev. James Cleveland, Herman Harris, Gino Vannelli, and Quincy Jones. These individuals, among others, inspired Whitfield to utilize the whole of his artistic passions in his music.

The Whitfield Sound was consequently formed and a new aural vocabulary was introduced to gospel music. Whitfield extended the parameters of choral singing, harmonic progression, song structure, musical texture and lyricism in gospel music. In the midst of this he became the Godfather of Modern Gospel Music Production and a forerunner for praise and worship music in the Black church.

The countless conversations with those who knew and were impacted by Thomas Whitfield provide insight to the continued legacy of his work nearly thirty years after his death. To them he represented the Black church, Shakespeare, and a healing salve all “wrapped up, tied up, and tangled up” in a beautiful communion.

Thomas Anthony Whitfield risked it all—controversy, exposure, and fame—to create a bridge for gospel artists to move from past to present. Though he is gone, his light still shines within the soul of gospel music. The hope of this dissertation is to encourage those who previously did not know of him to familiarize themselves with his life and legacy as a composer, arranger, choirmaster, and producer.

APPENDIX A

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY OF GOSPEL REFERENCED RECORDINGS

Year	Artist	Album Title	Record Label	Catalog Number
1969	Beverly Glenn Chorale	<i>Coming Again So Soon</i>	Cross Records	LPS 333
1974	James Cleveland with The Voices of Tabernacle	<i>God Has Smiled On Me</i>	Savoy Records	Savoy 14352
1976	The Voices of Tabernacle	<i>The Promise of God</i>	Sound of Gospel	SOG-2D-074
1977	The Voices of Tabernacle	<i>Hear Our Prayer</i>	Sound of Gospel	
1978	Thomas Whitfield and the Whitfield Company	<i>Brand New</i>	Sound of Gospel	SOG 086
1979	Thomas Whitfield and the Whitfield Company	<i>Things That We Believe, Vol. 1</i>	Sound of Gospel	SOG-094
1980	Thomas Whitfield and the Whitfield Company	<i>Things That We Believe, Vol. 2</i>	Sound of Gospel	SOG-095
1983	Thomas Whitfield and the Whitfield Company	<i>Hallelujah Anyhow</i>	Sound of Gospel	SOG-2D140
1983	Thomas Whitfield and the Whitfield Company	<i>Hold Me</i>	Onyx International Records	R3809
1938	Gospel Soul Children of New Orleans	<i>Live in Nashville with Thomas Whitfield</i>	Onyx International Records	RO3811
1983	Vanessa Bell Armstrong	<i>Peace Be Still</i>	Onyx International Records	R3831
1984	Vanessa Bell Armstrong	<i>Chosen</i>	Onyx International Records	RO3825

Year	Artist	Album Title	Record Label	Catalog Number
1984	Keith Pringle	<i>Perfect Peace</i>	Onyx International Records	RO3784
1985	Thomas Whitfield and the Whitfield Company	<i>I'm Encouraged</i>	Sound of Gospel	SOG-2D151
1985	Bishop Paul Morton	<i>Jesus, When Troubles Burden Me Down</i>	Onyx International Records	RO3820
1986	Gospel Soul Children of New Orleans	<i>New Orleans Gospel Soul Children</i>	Gospel Fame	PLM 7024
1987	Yolanda Adams	<i>Just As I Am</i>	Sound of Gospel	SOG-163
1987	Aretha Franklin	<i>One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism</i>	Arista Records	Arista 303-178
1988	Michael Fletcher Chorale	<i>Jesus...He's the One</i>	Sound of Gospel	SOG-172
1988	Thomas Whitfield and the Whitfield Company	<i>The Annual Christmas Services</i>	Sound of Gospel	SOG-180
1990	Thomas Whitfield and the Whitfield Company	<i>...And They Sang...a Hymn</i>	Sound of Gospel	SOG 2D179
1990	Thomas Whitfield	<i>My Faith</i>	Benson Records	R027003
1992	Thomas Whitfield and the Whitfield Company	<i>Alive and Satisfied</i>	Benson Records	75021-8533-2

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abraham, Molly. "Gospel Glory." *Detroit Free Press*, March 20, 1984.
- Boyer, Horace Clarence. *How Sweet the Sound: The Golden Age of Gospel*. Washington, D.C: Elliot & Clark Publishing, 1995.
- Burnim, Mellonee. "Gospel Music Research." *Black Music Research Journal* 1 (1980): 63–70.
- Carpenter, Bil. *Uncloody Days: The Gospel Music Encyclopedia*. Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard Corporation, 2005.
- Christian, Nichole M. "Gospel Moves out of the Churches into the Mainstream." *Detroit Free Press*, December 16, 1990, sec. 9Q.
- Collins, Lisa. "James Cleveland Dead at 59: He Was Dubbed 'King' of Gospel Music." *Billboard*, February 23, 1991.
- . "Master Producer Thomas Whitfield, 38, Dies...Among the Pioneers of Contemporary Gospel Music." *Billboard*, July 11, 1992, 30.
- . *The Gospel Music Industry Roundup 2002*. Culver City, CA: Eye on Gospel Publications, 2001.
- D'Agostino, John. "Mixing Pop and the Soul Music: Gino Vannelli Hasn't Always Found It Easy to Reconcile His Top 40 Success with His Classical Bent. But He's Getting There." *Los Angeles Times*, April 13, 1991.
- Gay, Gregory. "The Craig Brothers Interview." *Gospel Flava*. <http://www.gospelflava.com/articles/craigbrothersinterview2007.html> (accessed December 17, 2018).
- Givhan, Robin. "Gospel Artist Would like Worldly Success." *Detroit Free Press*, December 7, 1988.
- Horricks, Raymond, and Tony Middleton. *Quincy Jones*. New York: Hippocrene Books, 1985.
- "How I Got Over: The Spirit of Gospel Music - from Apollo Live Wire – How I Got Over: The Spirit of Gospel Music." Livestream. <https://livestream.com/accounts/2535196Apollolivewire/videos/167075222> (accessed December 12, 2017).
- Price III, Emmett G., Tammy Kernodle, and Horace Maxille. *Encyclopedia of African American Music*. "Thomas Whitfield." Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2010.
- Johnson, Birgitta. "'Oh, For A Thousand Tongues to Sing': Music and Worship in African American Megachurches of Los Angeles, California." Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 2008.

- Johnson, Idella Lulamae. "Development of African American Gospel Piano Style (1926-1960): A Socio-Musical Analysis of Arizona Dranes and Thomas Dorsey." Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 2009.
- Jones, Quincy. *Q: The Autobiography of Quincy Jones*. 1st ed. New York: Doubleday, 2001.
- Kerchner, Jody L., Katherine Strand, and Dominick DiOrio, eds. *Musicianship: Composing in Choir*. Chicago: GIA Publications, 2016.
- Legg, Andrew. "A Taxonomy of Musical Gesture in African American Gospel Music." *Popular Music* 29, no. 1 (2010): 103–29.
- Marovich, Robert M. *A City Called Heaven: Chicago and the Birth of Gospel Music*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015.
- Maynard, Dori J. "Singer Loved Modern Gospel." *Detroit Free Press*, June 22, 1992, 2B.
- Platon, Adelle. "Kirk Franklin on Gospel Music's Past, Present & Future." February 12, 2018. <http://read.tidal.com/article/black-history-month-2018-kirk-franklin-past-present-future>. (accessed September 14, 2018).
- Pollard, Deborah Smith. *When the Church Becomes Your Party: Contemporary Gospel Music*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2008.
- Ritz, David, and Brad Raymond. *Respect: The Life of Aretha Franklin*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2014.
- Trakin, Roy. "Kirk Franklin: The Message of 'Why,' Lyrics & Stevie Wonder." Recording Academy: Grammy Awards, September 5, 2017. <https://www.grammy.com/grammys/news/kirk-franklin-message-why-lyrics-stevie-wonder> (accessed December 15, 2018).
- Walker-Tyson, Joyce. "The Whitfield Sound Is Soaring High in Heavenly Music." *Detroit Free Press*, September 14, 1981, 8F.
- Watkins, David G. "Jazz in Review; A Candid Conversation with Gino Vanelli." *Michigan Chronicle*, 2005.
- "Well Known Detroit Minister, Rev. Craig, Dies." *JET*, January 25, 1968.
- West, Cornel, and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *The Future of the Race*. New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1997.
- Whitaker, Joseph D. "Troubled D.C. Child Emerges as Gospel-Singing Star." *The Washington Post*, October 3, 1980.
- Wise, Raymond. "Defining African American Gospel Music by Tracing Its Historical and Musical Development from 1900 to 2000." Ph.D. dissertation, The Ohio State University, 2002.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

As a conductor, composer and educator, Brandon Waddles has enjoyed a multifaceted career spanning a variety of genres. Brandon, a Detroit native, holds a B.A. in Music from Morehouse College (Atlanta, GA) and M.M. from Westminster Choir College of Rider University (Princeton, NJ). He earned his Ph.D. in Music Education with a Choral Conducting emphasis at Florida State University (Tallahassee, FL). Before pursuing his doctorate, he served on the Conducting and Sacred Music faculty at Westminster as conductor of the Westminster Jubilee Singers.

Brandon's choral compositions and arrangements have been published and performed by choral ensembles around the world, including the Morehouse College and University of Michigan Glee Clubs, Oakwood Aeolians, Westminster Choir, Brigham Young University Singers and the Slovenian Philharmonic Choir. In addition to these, he has worked as a transcriber of Black gospel music for numerous choral octavos, hymnals and hymnal supplements published by GIA, including his recent work as a contributing editor for the *One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism* hymnal.

Brandon has also served on the staffs of various music ministries throughout the country, including Hartford Memorial Baptist Church (Detroit, MI), the Historic Ebenezer Baptist Church (Atlanta, GA), Abyssinian Baptist Church (Harlem, New York City, NY), and First Baptist Church of Lincoln Gardens (Somerset, NJ), to name a few. He most recently served as Director of Music at Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church (Tallahassee, FL).

Brandon has been blessed to work with a diverse array of musicians including Dalton Baldwin, Martin Katz, Angela Brown, George Shirley, Donnie Ray Albert, Vinson Cole, Lauren Flannigan, Fred Hammond, Kathy Taylor and Chrystal Rucker. He has also, on several occasions, been called on as a lecturer on the evolution of Black gospel music and the Negro spiritual.

Mr. Waddles holds professional memberships with the American Choral Directors Association and the National Association of Negro Musicians, Inc.