



Spirituals remain at heart of Clarence Smith Community Chorus



HEATHER DENNISS

The Blade

hdenniss@theblade.com

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When Clarence R. Smith, Jr., returned to Toledo after finishing college, women wore peasant tops, men wore ruffled shirts, and hair was big.

Also big were songs such as “Dancing Queen,” “Hotel California,” “Bohemian Rhapsody,” “Play That Funky Music,” and “Afternoon Delight.” Rock, disco, soul, funk, jazz, R&B, and more were jostling for listeners.

These genres were outside the walls of houses of worship, trying to get in. Inside, Smith said, especially in Black churches, gospel music was replacing a version of something old, something historic, and something timeless: the spirituals.

HEAR THEM SING

What: Clarence Smith Community Chorus with the Masterworks Chorale

When: 3 p.m. Saturday

Where: Toledo Museum of Art’s Great Gallery, 2445 Monroe St., Toledo

Cost: Free

More information: Go to cscchorus.com

So when Smith, a music instructor in the Toledo Public Schools and the church musician at Grace Presbyterian Church, was asked to form a chorus for the church’s new community center in 1976, he wanted to make sure the spiritual did not disappear.

“It used to be that spirituals were sung in Black churches, and they were also sung in some white churches,” Smith said. “But gospel music was really becoming the king of the mountain, so to speak, in ... general music in the religious Black church context.”

In 2023, the Clarence Smith Community Chorus is still singing. And his about 36 members say they aren’t vanishing any time soon.

For nearly 50 years, Smith has spent the bulk of his Mondays at rehearsals leading his chorus not only in spirituals but classical and choral music, and jazz, and soul, and Broadway tunes. And all the while he’s been mentoring Toledo talent and exposing Toledoans to different cultures.

Different, perhaps. But still so much the same: It's American music.

The Negro spiritual began as a form of expression by the mass of people impressed into slavery from Africa and elsewhere from the mid-17th century through the end of the Civil War, Smith said. The sing-song form was also used as a vehicle to keep up spirits, express a people's misery, and to send coded messages to other slaves.

Passed down orally through the generations, spirituals were written down and published after emancipation.

In 1871, African-American students at Fisk University in Nashville formed the Fisk Jubilee Singers, an a cappella ensemble that took the Negro spirituals out into the world, even performing in Europe before Britain's Queen Victoria. The endeavor began as a fund-raiser for the university, Smith said, and was successful enough to rescue the nascent Black college from financial ruin, according to [a National Geographic article published last year](#).

According to the article, during its first 18-month tour, the group raised about \$40,000.

In 1873, Samuel Langhorne Clemens, known as Mark Twain to millions, wrote about these singers who performed the songs he had heard during his childhood: "I do not know when anything has so moved me as did the Jubilee Singers. One must have been slave himself in order to feel what that life was and so convey the pathos of it in the music."

The Fisk Jubilee Ensemble is still performing generations later.

As more and more Black colleges followed in Fisk's footsteps, the spiritual became "gospelized," so it wasn't just music of the fields.

"More and more arrangers started making classical-style arrangements of spirituals," Smith said. "We wanted to preserve that format for spirituals, which were being performed less and less even within the African-American culture."

It isn't, he said, a competition between gospel and the spiritual.

“It was more, ‘Let’s not lose the spiritual expression format while we’re doing the Gospel,’ ” Smith said.

The Clarence Smith Community Chorus, which started out with about 20 members, performs about two to three concerts a year, but it’s not all about one form of music.

“One of the major points of mission for the community chorus was preserving Negro spirituals. In addition to that it was just a love of choral music in general with spirituals being a significant part of it,” Smith said. “Spirituals are about 60 percent, 65 percent of what we do.”

The rest of the chorus’ repertoire is expansive.

“We do a variety of other things. If you name it, we probably would have done it. We were also doing Broadway kind of things,” he said. “We had jazz shows, and of course, we’ve worked on all kinds of classical pieces.”

The Clarence Smith Community Chorus is far busier than its own concert schedule might suggest.

His group has performed with the Toledo Symphony and Toledo Opera, Masterworks Chorale, Voices of Harmony, Toledo Jazz Society, Toledo Brass Quintet, Claude Black, Clifford Murphy, Jon Hendricks, Nell Carter, Kathleen Battle, choirs from colleges and universities including Bowling Green, Central State, and Lourdes, just to name a few. Among the people the chorus has performed for are the Rev. Jesse Jackson, then-U.S. Sen. Barack Obama, and several vice presidents, including Walter Mondale and George H.W. Bush.

Northwest Ohio and southern Michigan is the general travel region for the chorus, but it has performed in Columbus, and in Louisville for a celebration of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. While it hasn’t traveled to Europe — yet — Smith said, “We wouldn’t be opposed to it.”



The chorus and Smith have a list of awards too many to mention. The Clarence Smith Community Chorus has recorded two albums over the years and has presented a televised *Community Celebration of Christmas* since 2016.

It was at a Christmas concert that Mary Meadows decided she wanted to be part of the chorus community. The coronavirus pandemic delayed her membership, but last fall she finally joined.

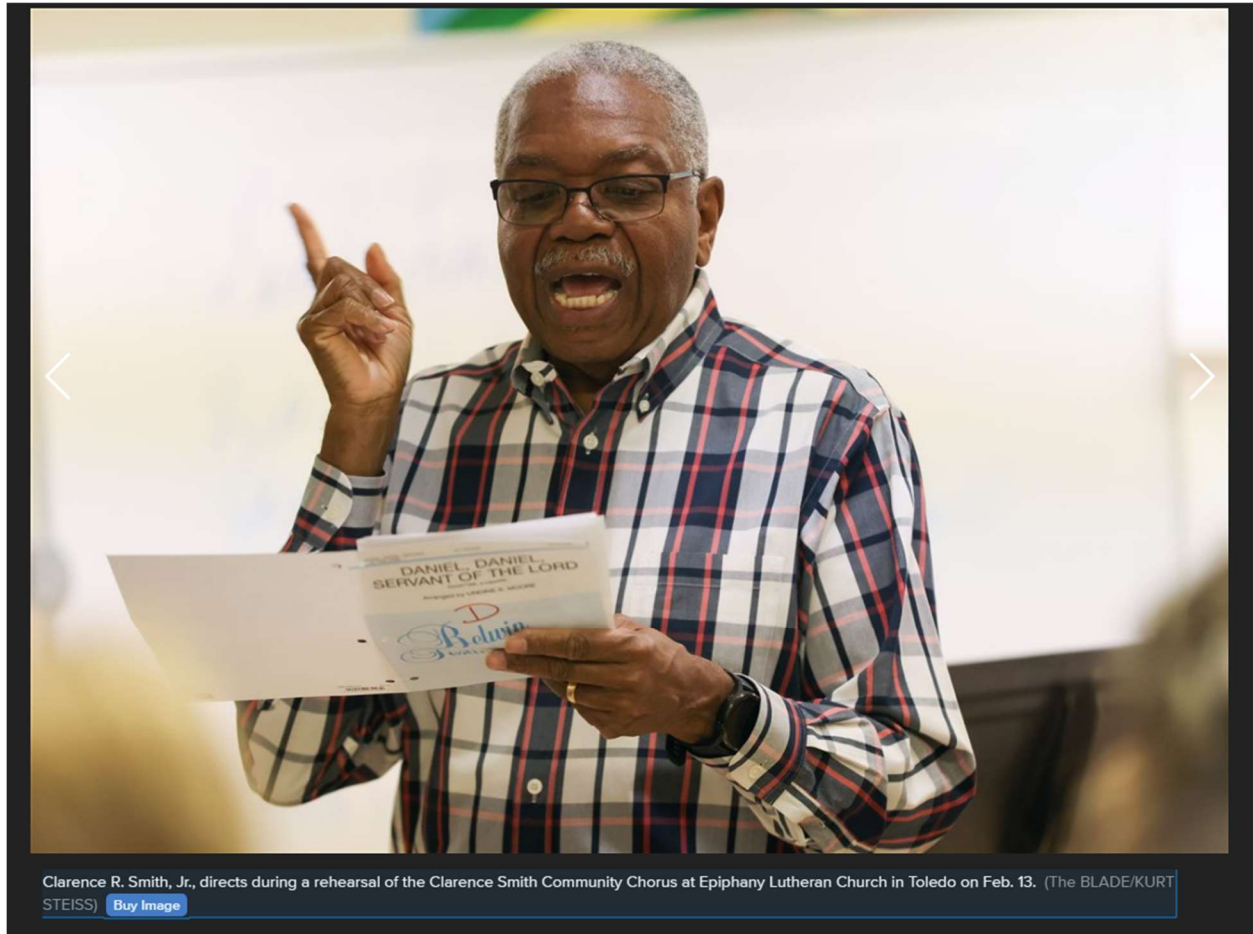
“I appreciated the Christmas music they did, the enthusiasm, the diversity, the choir, and the listing of Black composers, and spirituals,” Meadows said.

Meadows has the singing chops, having sung in high school and college choirs, as well as the now-defunct Toledo Symphony Chorus. But she understands that members’ musical abilities vary. For example, some can’t read music, some can.

Meadows said Smith not only conducts them, he mentors them.

“He tries to make it successful for everybody,” Meadows said. “And he also does a little bit of musical education to help people with their music, rhythm, and things of that nature.

“He’s an educator at heart.”



Clarence R. Smith, Jr., directs during a rehearsal of the Clarence Smith Community Chorus at Epiphany Lutheran Church in Toledo on Feb. 13. (The BLADE/KURT STEISS) [Buy Image](#)

Some members have learned so well that they’ve gone on to further their career in opera, musical theater, and popular music.

Smith said no one has to be a star to sing in the chorus. All he asks is that you can sing — in tune.

“Some of the music we do can get pretty complicated, so if you’re challenged in terms of even keeping your own part, then you’re going to have a real frustrating time,” Smith said. “The whole idea is to make this as gratifying for you as it is for the audience.”

While there are other attributes he gauges — for example, an applicant’s vocal range — there’s one big question he’ll ask: some version of, “How committed will you be to this chorus?”

Smith said he expects members to show up to rehearsals at least 75 percent of the time.

“People are more commitment averse now, and as a result there’s greater loneliness,” he said. “One of the things that people miss in the process of avoiding that commitment that joining an organization requires is that sense of family, is knowing that every Monday you’re getting together with people who you know and know you.”

He said a majority of members have been in the chorus for more than 10 years, with some making more than 20 or 30 years.

They have become family.

“This chorus is older than my children,” the 74-year-old Smith said. “By now we’ve lived through life experiences together. We’ve grown old together. We’ve lived through children, and births, all the elements of life. We’ve shared that journey together.”

Dorcel Dowdell is one singer who has gone on the journey with Smith and other long-serving members. She joined the chorus about 30 years ago, she said, after attending a concert. She, like Meadows, said the choral music and the spirituals attracted her to the group.



Clarence R. Smith, Jr., directs during a rehearsal of the Clarence Smith Community Chorus at Epiphany Lutheran Church in Toledo on Monday, Feb. 13, 2023. THE BLADE/KURT STEISS (The BLADE/KURT STEISS) [Buy Image](#)

But at the time, she said, she didn't realize what she was getting into.

"I probably didn't realize that rehearsals would take a time commitment, time to study the music week after week in order to put on a great concert. There's a lot of work that goes in to it," Dowdell said. "Rehearsals can be intense, but they can also be fun at the same time."

It's fun because there is always someone ready with a joke or something funny, from Smith or other members, that will lighten the mood. It's fun because the older members get to welcome the newer members into the group. And it's fun because the chorus often arranges social events so the singers can relax and socialize, whether it's getting together after a performance or at a member's house to "just hang out together," Dowdell said.

"We get together in small groups, and we might go to a performance together, we might go to the Valentine or the Peristyle together," she said.

And she's seen people come and go.

“We have some long-term members, and we also have members who have been here for a season or two, and then they're not able to perform,” Dowdell said. “So the chorus members are always changing, which is a good thing, because they get to experience the community chorus.”

And while some groups complain that they can't draw younger members, that doesn't seem to be the case with the community chorus, Dowdell said. Younger members keep showing up, wanting to join.

So too do laborers, educators, principals, dentists, doctors, secretaries, counselors. They are Black, and they are white, and they are Hispanic. They are musically educated or they can simply carry a tune.

“All of those different backgrounds, we've been able to bring them together and keep the focus and share the focus on the beauty of choral music,” Smith said.



Clarence R. Smith, Jr., directs during a rehearsal of the Clarence Smith Community Chorus at Epiphany Lutheran Church in Toledo on Monday, Feb. 13, 2023. THE

Music has the power to bridge the divides that keep growing wider, he said.

“The message I’ve tried to deliver to not only our members but also to our audience, is that the music that we’re singing, while it may not have come directly from your culture, it delivers a universal message, that all of us can relate to. It is a part of you,” Smith said.

“Whoever you are, you can come to a concert and put some of that other stuff aside. Just enjoy the music, and feel comfortable in the context of what’s being presented. Because you’re different it enriches everything that we do.”

It’s been said that music is the universal language. Perhaps, then, Smith said, what is needed today are “fewer words, more music.”

Contact Heather Denniss at hdenniss@theblade.co





Clarence R. Smith, Jr., directs during a rehearsal of the Clarence Smith Community Chorus at Epiphany Lutheran Church in Toledo on Feb. 13. (The BLADE/KURT STEISS) [Buy Image](#)



People sing during a rehearsal of the Clarence Smith Community Chorus at Epiphany Lutheran Church in Toledo on Feb. 13. (The BLADE/KURT STEISS) [Buy Image](#)





Wanda Kirtz-Tanksley sings her solo in 'Daniel, Daniel, Servant Of The Lord' during a rehearsal of the Clarence Smith Community Chorus at Epiphany Lutheran Church. (The BLADE/KURT STEISS) [Buy Image](#)