



**GREAT GOSPEL JAZZ PIONEERS:
Part 1: Ramsey Lewis**

By Terrence Richburg © 2008

The phenomenal musical artistry of Ramsey Lewis is vastly celebrated throughout the world by audiences of all walks of life. However, his musical journey implicitly served as a foundational underpinning for the development of Gospel Jazz as an accepted new form of music. Born **Ramsey Emmanuel Lewis, Jr.** on May 27, 1935, Lewis excels as a Jazz icon, composer, and pianist. Touted as "the great performer," his performance style and musical repertoire flourished from his early gospel technique and classical training along with his profound love of Jazz and other musical forms. Lewis had no experience playing Jazz, except for recordings his father played around his home which included such greats as Duke Ellington, Art Tatum, Mead Lux Lewis and others. He was only 15 when a fellow church musician, Wallace Burton, asked him to join his Jazz band and took the time to coach Lewis to learn (to him) the "brand new" language of Jazz. This provided Ramsey with his first real experience with Jazz, which soon became the major force in his musical life, but European classical and Gospel music were of almost equal importance--the fusion of which reflects his signature Gospel Jazz musical style of today. By 1966, Lewis was hailed as one of the most dominant Jazz pianists in the nation, topping the charts with such popular Gospel Jazz tunes as "*Wade in the Water*." Many of his recordings captivated large non-Jazz audiences. To his credit Ramsey Lewis has recorded over 80 albums and CDs and has received five gold records and three Grammy Awards so far in his extraordinary career. Recently, however, Ramsey was awarded the 2006 Stellar presented in January 2007 for Best Gospel Instrumental Album, "With One Voice," which featured the Gospel "Smooth" Jazz hit cover of the Edwin Hawkins classic, "*Oh Happy Day*."

(NOTE: This article was originally published in 2008)



**GREAT GOSPEL JAZZ PIONEERS:
Part 2: Aretha Franklin**

By Terrence Richburg © 2008

As one of the most significant, influential and versatile vocalists of our time, Aretha Franklin stands alone in her vocal ability as a "once in a life-time" gift of music from God and has contributed greatly to the landscape of popular music as we know it today. Aretha was born on March 25, 1942, in Memphis, Tennessee to the Rev. C. L. Franklin, a Baptist minister, and Barbara Siggers Franklin. After her family's move to Detroit, Michigan, where Rev. Franklin gained national fame as a preacher assuming the pulpit of the New Bethel Baptist Church, Aretha who displayed her adept touch on the piano as well as her exceptional voice became a child prodigy.

By the early age of fourteen, she signed a record deal with Checker Records, where her father's sermons and her gospel vocal recordings were released on the *Songs of Faith* project in 1956. Her earlier influences included gospel greats, Clara Ward and Mahalia Jackson, both of whom visited Aretha's home regularly. However, later being inspired by the industry success of Dinah Washington and Sam Cooke, Aretha decided to pursue a career as a pop artist. After being offered contracts from Motown and RCA, Franklin signed with Columbia Records in 1960.

Her recordings during that time reflected more of a Jazz influence inspired by Washington as she moved away from her gospel upbringings. Franklin went on to be an amazing recording artist with monumental success as she reached and maintains her current status as the "Queen of Soul."

Even so, Aretha never lost her ability to flow effortlessly between the genres of Gospel, R&B, Jazz, and Blues within her vast repertoire of recording projects, even masterfully mixing styles within individual song performances. Though there exist no equals, many modern vocalists continue to learn, imitate and borrow from Franklin's incredible vocal technique, control and soul-stirring sound.

(NOTE: This revised article was originally published in 2008. Sadly, Aretha left us on Aug 16, 2018. But she will assuredly maintain her status as "Queen," being unmatched by any other singer that would ever try to successfully recreate or emulate her one-of-a-kind sound and mastery of incredible vocal ability and inspiration.)



**GREAT GOSPEL JAZZ PIONEERS:
Part 3: Thomas Whitfield**

By Terrence Richburg © 2009

The new influence and appeal of Jazz in Gospel music was greatly advanced among modern gospel writers, musicians and producers by none other than the multifaceted **Thomas Anthony Whitfield** (April 30, 1954 - June 20, 1992). In fact, when you ask Gospel musicians, students and industry professionals alike the question, "Who has been a major influence musically in your life?" the name Thomas Whitfield is very likely to come up, especially when it comes to his signature Jazz progressions and harmony.

Whitfield has been recognized by many as being the catalyst for helping mold the very character of contemporary gospel music with his intricate choral arrangements and merging of musical styles ranging from Jazz to classical into existing gospel music traditions. This fresh stylistic approach, along with Whitfield's reputation as a prolific gospel songwriter, singer, arranger, pianist, choral director and producer, distinguished him with the honor and title of "*Maestro*" by many of his colleagues and supporters. Whitfield wrote and arranged over 200 songs during his life's career.

He was best known for organizing one of the most popular contemporary gospel choirs of all time, the **Thomas Whitfield Company**, and for producing best-selling recordings for Vanessa Bell Armstrong, Shirley Caesar, Yolanda Adams, Douglas Miller, Keith Pringle, Paul Morton and for Aretha Franklin. Initially, some audiences criticized his music as being too "contemporary." Nevertheless, by the mid-1980's, Whitfield had produced, written and arranged some of Gospel music's most recognized and enduring recordings. Even today, many major urban contemporary Gospel icons like Kirk Franklin, Fred Hammond, and Donald Lawrence acknowledge the legacy of "The Maestro" as being key to shaping their musical style, which features elaborate instrumental and choral productions with similar multi-styled fusion of Jazz, contemporary and traditional Gospel, Classical, R&B and international or world ethnic music arrangements.

(NOTE: This article was originally published in 2009.)

*NOTE: "Without a doubt the incredible pristine, virtuosic female "group" vocals of The Clark Sisters are somewhat reminiscent of the early Jazz and "Swing" era sound made famous by the close harmony and versatile arrangements of such greats as The Andrew Sisters. Yet, the Clarks are more renowned for their unique, vocal styling, dubbed as "The Clark Sound," which incorporates high and fast vocal runs and arpeggios, acrobatic trills and Jazz riffs, and deep, soulful growls. Some of the most renowned artists and influences of the Gospel Jazz realm are musical giants. Gospel Jazz is not just instrumental, but includes a whole host of vocal expressionists and stylists as well, and in some ways represents some of the most essential contributions to the music industry and historical foundation, as a whole. Some of these great **Gospel Jazz Pioneers** and architects of the genre might surprise you."*



GREAT GOSPEL JAZZ PIONEERS: Part 4: The Clark Sound - The Clark Sisters

By Terrence Richburg © 2009

Without a doubt the incredible pristine, virtuosic female "group" vocals of The Clark Sisters is somewhat reminiscent of the early Jazz and "Swing" era sound made famous by the close harmony and versatile arrangements of such greats as The Andrew Sisters. Yet, the Clarks are more renowned for their unique, vocal styling, dubbed as "The Clark Sound," which incorporates high and fast vocal runs and arpeggios, acrobatic trills and Jazz riffs, and deep, soulful growls.

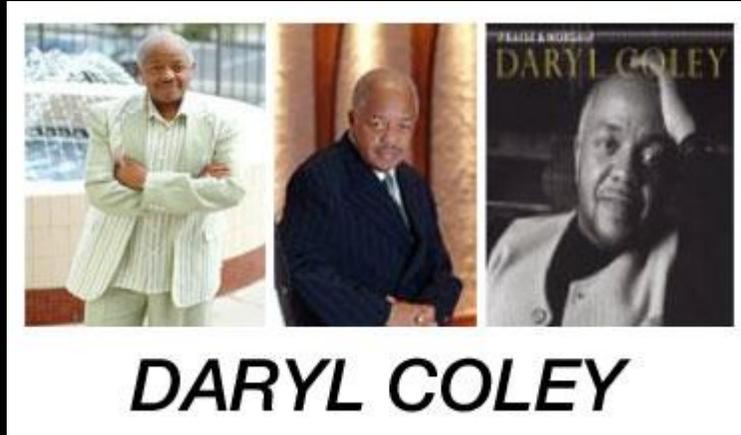
The sisters are also very well known for each distinctive vocal quality they individually contribute to the personality and appeal of the group as well as the dynamics of each song they sing. Jacky (alto/tenor) is known for her soft, deeper vocal sound. Dorinda (alto) is the Jazz singer who astounds audiences with her scats and riffs sometimes reminiscent of the classic Bebop sound of Ella Fitzgerald and Betty Carter. Karen (soprano) is more known for her soul-stirring riffs, runs, extremely high vocal range, and authentic "self-echo" simulations she uses in her live performances. Twinkie (alto/tenor/soprano) has been often described as the "heart of the Clark Sisters" serving in the group's early development as chief songwriter, music and vocal arranger, producer and also possessing a wide vocal range from soprano to contralto. There exists no single lead vocalist in the group. Nevertheless, together they all support the dominant Jazz flavor, unique articulation and exciting harmonic quality in their award-winning hit recordings and performances. Since then each sister has gone on to solo artist careers, releasing successful projects and firmly establishing themselves independently within the Gospel Music industry.

However, their enduring fans continued to embrace the fabulous sound, chemistry and power-house ministry of the original Clark unit. Having not released a full CD project as group in almost two decades, in 2007 The Clark Sisters finally fulfilled the dreams of their adoring fans with a reunion performance and CD project entitled, "Live - One Last Time"-one of the most anticipated releases of the year. Produced by musical genius, Donald Lawrence, he declared this project as a "dream come true," as the recording took on landmark status with effortless mixes of old and new material. The magnetic appeal of the group's performance on this recording re-established "The Clark Sound" and reinvigorated loyal audiences while introducing their amazing artistry and abundant mastery vocally and as writers to countless new converts. Along with fresh, innovative songs to be celebrated for years to come, they also took a trip down memory lane for the "true Clark fan," featuring such past favorites as, "You Brought The Sunshine", "Holy Will", "Name It Claim It", "Got An Angel", "My Redeemer Liveth" and "Pray For The USA." This reunion project experience was truly worth the wait for all Clark Sisters fans and supporters. Fortunately, due to a new record deal with EMI Gospel, The Clark Sisters will be providing fans with more great music and "The Clark Sound."

(NOTE: This article was originally published in 2009.)

GREAT GOSPEL JAZZ PIONEERS: Part 5: DARYL COLEY - A Singer's Singer-A Voice Divine

By Terrence Richburg © 2009



A voice heaven-crafted and infinitely ordained like that of Daryl Coley's was inevitably destined to touch the world of music in countless encounters without regard to stylistic boundaries or labels--which ultimately are only necessary for the human mind to grasp. Nevertheless, Coley's voice existed outside those very boundaries of human understanding for the awesome gift that it was. He was intimately versed and comfortably at home musically in the world of Jazz and Classical as much as he was with traditional and contemporary Gospel music and was loved by the diverse listeners and fans of these genres universally. Coley had been given many titles including "a singer's singer," but I would boldly affirm that if there was one male voice designed specifically by God to sing for Him it would have been that of Daryl Coley. His flawless articulation and impeccable vocal technique were extraordinary and unmatched among his peers. His effortless command of improvisational skills and vocal control were equally as impressive. Even Coley's smooth vocal contour and rich texture, pouring out like crystal clear water captivated the ear's attention like no other.

However, Coley's most exceptional quality was his ability to take a song and use his voice as a spiritual guide to impart to each member of his audience the flow and depth of emotion and experiential wealth intended not only from the singer's and writer's perspective, but also from God's own personal touch and eternal revelation. Daryl Coley was born in Berkley, California in 1955 and raised in Oakland, California, where he spent the major portion of his early developmental years informally mentored by his upbringing in the church and his mother's love also as a vocalist for Gospel, Classical and Jazz music. During Coley's teenage era, he attended vocal and instrumental training (learning clarinet and piano--self-taught) in school bands and regional choirs up until 1977; when he moved on to perform with the famous Hawkins Family. Daryl excelled as a singer with Edwin Hawkins and later as a songwriter and musical director for Tramaine Hawkins, until he left to team up with James Cleveland in 1983.

Later Coley collaborated with Jazz artists Nancy Wilson and Rodney Franklin and also pop singer Philip Bailey. Coley enjoyed a ceaseless string of chart-topping album projects and award nominations. Additionally, he worked with some of the music industry's most talented and trailblazing artists including such greats as Stevie Wonder, Ramsey Lewis, Richard Smallwood, Sylvester, Quincy Jones, Allen & Allen and more. Coley soared as a recording artist logging a ground-breaking anthology of more than 100 studio performances; nevertheless, his defining strength and signature appeal had always been that of his live concerts.

Live, Daryl Coley was entirely in his element, capturing the essence of the music, lyrics and heartbeat of the moment--instinctively sensing the flow of any emotional and spiritual need of the audience. His consistent artistry in maximizing the live performance opportunity still remains unsurpassed. One of the most amazing performances I ever witnessed was during a Bobby Jones Gospel concert taping where Daryl Coley and the late great Rev. James Moore traded classical and improvisational runs, jazz riffs and scats, gut-authored growls, and astounding vocal mastery on the same stage together--a truly magical yet anointed moment witnessed by many in Gospel Music history.

NOTE: This revised article was originally published in 2009. Sadly, Daryl Coley passed away to receive his reward in heaven on Mar 15, 2016. His death marks the end of an unparalleled era of great accomplishments by Coley that shall nevertheless live on forever in the world of gospel and gospel-jazz music.

GREAT GOSPEL JAZZ PIONEERS: Part 6: "From the Depths of an Anointed Vessel"

By Terrence Richburg © 2010



Yolanda Adams is one of the most (if not the most) celebrated and successful Gospel female artist of the 21st century. Her unparalleled vocal sound is naturally intense yet endearing, powerful yet consoling and captivates audiences and artists alike with a stylistic diversity and rare approach which sets her apart from all others in modern times. Yolanda's unique rapid-fire staccato ad lib vocal style, free-style unscripted scats and signature improvisational melodic phrasing incorporates Neo-Soul, Jazz, Hip-Hop and contemporary Gospel fusion at its best. The essence of Yolanda's sound emanates from a willingness to be used as a vessel by God even from the depths of her spiritual anointing.

Adams began a career as a schoolteacher and part-time model in Houston, but eventually moved from teaching to a full-time performance career as a lead singer. Adams immediately attracted the attention of Thomas Whitfield and Sound of Gospel Records and was soon signed to a record deal birthing her first album, *Just As I Am* in 1987. But in 1990, she signed to Ben Tankard's independent record label Tribute Records and released the renowned CD, *Through The Storm*, which featured the hot Gospel Jazz track, "The Only Way." Under Tankard's careful direction Yolanda's

rare timbre began to attract the loyal support of listeners and audiences everywhere. Her soulful, jazz-based flavor became an instant draw--a sound easily recognized and embraced among fans from all walks of life.

Two years later with Tankard's label, Adams followed with the release of *Save the World*, which included her first signature song "The Battle Is The Lord's." Her next release in 1995, *More Than A Melody*, began to further expand and expose Adams' vocal creativity and ministry into the popular mainstream with collaborative production work from Ben Tankard, O'Landa Draper, and Bebe Winans. The single "Gotta Have Love," from that release, featuring the complementary vocal talent of Tony Terry on background vocals, gained monumental notoriety and was her first single and music video production.

Yolanda has gone on to soaring heights with many more project releases, major music industry awards, impressive artist accomplishments and personal successes within and outside the urban contemporary gospel arena. These include such major works as the 1998 release of *Songs from the Heart*, and *Mountain High...Valley Low* in 1999 on Elektra Records, a project which involved several notable artist and production contributions from such icons as Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis, (Janet Jackson, Boyz II Men), James "Big Jim" Wright (Mariah Carey, Nicole C. Mullen), Warryn Campbell (Mary Mary, Brandy), and Keith Thomas (BeBe & CeCe Winans). The album achieved Platinum status in 2000 and yielded Adams a Grammy Award. Significant singles from the CD album include "Yeah," "Fragile Heart," and "Open My Heart."

Other remarkable successes included Adams' 2000 Christmas CD release, a 2001 live album release, *The Experience*, winning Adams a second Grammy Award for Best Contemporary Soul Gospel Album, and *Believe*, another 2001 release which included the hit "Never Give Up." *Believe* was certified Gold in 2002. She has followed with additional releases in 2005, *Day by Day*, another 2005 release, *Just As I Am/New Born Soul*, a 2006 release, *The Essential Yolanda Adams*, and three 2007 releases, (a Columbia greatest hits collection) *The Best of Me, Yolanda Adams, Greatest Hits* and a 2nd career holiday release, *What a Wonderful Time*.

Adams has continued her awe-inspiring performance schedule with such notable appearances as BET's "The Mo'Nique Show," where she sang one of Monique's favorites, "Alright, Already" from the album, *Mountain High...Valley Low*. Yolanda's debut book, *Points of Power*, was released this year. Adams is currently the host of *The Yolanda Adams Morning Show*, which currently airs on Urban Gospel stations owned by Radio One. Adams' matchless success is a sincere testimony of what can happen when an anointed human vessel remains faithful to their true calling, devoted to their gift, and committed to the glory of God.

(NOTE: This article was originally published in 2010.)
