

# Bringing the Gospel to Jazz: A Misfit's Theme

I love gospel music. Its haunting tones solicit a response like no other. Somebody shout, "Hallelujah!" Can I get an "Amen"? Wait—before you do, let's explore this a bit more closely.

The gospel feeling found in jazz is heavenly to these ears, but gospel music is quite the paradox. It comprises the musical spirit of a people kidnapped from a beautiful homeland, enslaved, stripped of most of their culture, language, separated from their families and introduced (many forced to convert) to Christianity. Hence the religious term "gospel." Accordingly, before there was "black gospel" music, there was pain and sorrow in the hearts of an oppressed people communicated through the "negro" spiritual. Can you hear the music?

Sonny Stitt said in a 1965 interview with Les Tomkins: "There's no new path to jazz. Jazz is jazz. They can mix the notes up however they want to, but there's no way to change it. They've gained knowledge, sure, but all this came from the servitude of the slaves. They used to be so unhappy they'd go down there and be moaning, and singing songs. That's all they could do. So that's how it started. Spiritual music—that'll never change." (Source: The National Jazz Archive, United Kingdom.)

Of course, brother Sonny was right on the money. These songs, chanted like healing incantations by converted slaves working in plantation fields, were thought to lift the spirit of those laboring. Those spirituals later birthed the blues (an equally sorrowful song) and along came Thomas A. Dorsey, who brought blues and the "negro" spiritual, consummated, to the black church. This sound is what became known as black gospel, with Dorsey credited as its father. While he created neither the spiritual nor the blues, I believe it was his understanding of both that allowed him to fuse the two voices. You see, his father was a minister but his mother was a piano teacher and he learned to play the blues as a young man.

I share this to offer insight into the rich and painful history of African music inspired by oppression in America. Before adding any "technique" to your sound, there should be an understanding deep enough to form a logical if not spiritual connection to its application.

That being said, I'd like to share some concepts of the "black gospel" style and their application to jazz.

## GOSPEL FORMS

Very much like jazz standards, Thomas Dorsey's gospel sound had a "standard" form derived partly from the traditional blues structure. See Example 1. At the end of this form is a turnaround that has become common to gospel and can be applied to any song that contains a iii-vi-ii-V-I harmonic structure. Let's use this common turnaround as an example of how to use gospel sensibility in jazz harmony. You may find this most useful in song forms that contain blues or rhythm changes.

First let's play it as written in Example 2.

Notice the turnaround chord changes are kept diatonic to the key. To add a gospel approach to this feel, we substitute as shown in Example 3:

- V/I replaces the iii chord.
- ii/vi for one count and ii/I for one count replaces vi.
- iim7 becomes ii.
- iii/V for one count and ii/V for one count replace V.
- I to IV replaces the I chord and resolves (predictably) in the next measure.

This is the meat, but to truly complete this feel, we need to add a pick-



up measure. In Example 4, we take beats 3 and 4 of the pickup measure and play:

- I/III for one count.
- IVm6 for one count.

Another common variation is to begin on beat 2 of the pickup and add a #IV diminished chord as shown in Example 5:

- I/III for one count.
- ii/IV for one count.
- #IV diminished for one count.

Examples 2–5 show a variety of combinations that can be played to suit the tone of the gospel-infused song. A listen to some gospel recordings will reveal many different variations in meter, rhythm, harmony and tempo, including the use of dominant chords to replace some of the minor ones.

## CALL & RESPONSE

Some characteristics of the gospel-infused sound include a "call and response"-styled melody derived from the plantation field songs and later in prison "chain gang" chants. You can find this stylized in the classic compositions "Work Song" by Nat Adderley and "Moanin'" by Bobby Timmons.

I'll use a portion of my original composition "Mt. Olive Hop" to demonstrate this idea. See Example 6.

The first phrase begins with a syncopated "call" with a shorter group response. The second "call" phrase is a variation of the first with the response from the group remaining the same.

I use the same call-and-response pattern (like an escalating field chant) modulated up a minor third, then a whole step from there before breaking off into another staple of the gospel sound, the #IV diminished chord. This typically resolves to I/V, but in this case I begin the turnaround in F, and through another ii-V series we return to the key of C.

Although this is somewhat morphed from its original state, the connections remain clear. The last bar includes a chromatic climb to the V7 chord (as in our previous example) before returning to the beginning of the form, much like the blues form. This same phrase can be found in Thomas Dorsey's gospel composition "Old Ship Of Zion" and in reverse fashion in "It's A Highway To Heaven," which also features a call-and-response format.

## ANCESTRAL TRADITION

My first year at the Berklee College of Music, I discovered the music of Timmons. I was immediately drawn to the recognizable sound in his melodies: gospel. Timmons' compositions were said to have been simple in form, and it was said that he did not like the assertion that he only composed "simple" music. He was a misfit of sorts. However, I would counter that he made music in the tradition of his ancestors and left room for improvisation and development.

It's my belief that jazz would not exist in the form it does today if not for black gospel music and its contributors. This may or may not ring true for you. I guess that depends on your particular "jazz leanings" and where you met this "social music" in the first place.

I met her at the Greater Adams Street Church of God By Faith, a Pentecostal (or holiness) congregation where along with God and love, music reigned supreme. I didn't recognize what I heard every Sunday as jazz; to me it was church music. It was Dorsey, Mahalia Jackson, James Cleveland and Daryl Coley. It was the Mississippi Mass Choir and the Georgia Mass Choir. It was the syncopation of Hammond organ, drums and bass. It was the moans of elderly grandmothers who sang about get-

ting to heaven and receiving their reward. It served as my first musical training ground, and I was happy to participate in any capacity.

Later, I came to know this sound as Duke Ellington, Timmons, Jimmy Smith, Gene Harris, Oscar Peterson, Art Tatum, Albert Ammons, Pete Johnson and, much later, Eric Reed and Cyrus Chestnut.

The marriage of jazz and gospel is complicated at best and surely steeped in sorrow. It can encompass pure joy only because of those who toiled ground they could not own and laid the foundation for the song we sing. I envision this music as a vehicle for sharing that story, for passing on this complex history—a history held together by tension from all sides.

I neglected to mention something rather significant: Dorsey's "gospel" music was not received well initially. Ministers did not want it sung in their churches because of its worldly tinge. Dorsey had to organize his own gatherings to share the music in the early days. So it seems he was also a "misfit" ... until he wasn't.

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Allentown, New Jersey-based pianist-composer Enoch Smith Jr.'s musical approach is steeped in his ongoing work as a church pianist and the sounds of such late gospel keyboard greats as James Cleveland and Thomas Whitfield. His working quartet is at the core of his latest CD, *Misfits II: Pop* (MisfitMe Music), as well as its predecessor, *Misfits*. He can be contacted at [misfitme.com](http://misfitme.com).

### Example 1

Example 1 shows piano accompaniment in 4/4 time. The chords are: G, G7, C, G, G, G, D, G, G7, C, G, G/D, Em, A7, D7, G, C, G.

### Example 2

Example 2 shows piano accompaniment in 4/4 time. The chords are: Em7, Am7, Dm7, G7, Cmaj6.

### Example 3

Example 3 shows piano accompaniment in 4/4 time. The chords are: C/G, Dm/A, Am7, Dm, Em/G, Dm/G, C, F/C, C.

### Example 4

Example 4 shows piano accompaniment in 4/4 time. The chords are: C/E, F6, C/G, Dm/A, Am7, Dm, Em/G, Dm/G, C, F/C, C.

### Example 5

Example 5 shows piano accompaniment in 4/4 time. The chords are: C/E, F6, F#7, C/G, Dm/A, Am7, Dm, Em/G, Dm/G, C, F/C, C.

### Example 6

Example 6 shows piano accompaniment in 4/4 time. The chords are: C/E, F6, C/G, C/E, F6, C/G, Eb/G, Ab, EbBb, Eb/G, Ab, EbBb, F4m, G7, C7, F7, Eb7, D7, G7, C7.