“If I Could Hear My Mother Pray Again”--Thomas A. Dorsey (1934)

Added to the National Registry: 2007
Essay by Robert F. Darden (guest post)*

Thomas A. Dorsey

Gospel legend Thomas Dorsey’s “If I Could Hear My Mother Pray Again” is an intriguing choice for inclusion into the National Recording Registry. Though Dorsey wrote such towering gospel masterpieces as “Take My Hand, Precious Lord,” “(There’ll Be) Peace in the Valley for Me,” and “Hide Me in Thy Bosom,” he did not compose “If I Could Hear My Mother Pray Again.” Nor does it sound like his better-known gospel compositions, with its quirky, almost vaudeville-styled rhythms and structure. Dorsey’s recorded performance of the song in 1934 is decidedly casual, a peculiar blend of conversational singsong with ragtime touches.

And yet, “If I Could Hear My Mother Pray Again” has remained a staple in the fiercely demanding world of gospel music, recorded by many of the top artists in the field over the past eighty years. It is also one of the first of a peculiar, sub-genre in gospel, the somber, almost melancholy lament for a late mother, whose Christian virtues the performer celebrates in song.

As for the original, it was written in 1922 by John Whitfield Vaughan, with the lyrics based, in part, on a text by James Rowe. By 1924, it was already widely known and, as recorded by the Jenkins Family on OKeh 40214 (backed with “The Church in the Wildwood”), became one of the best-selling 78 RMP releases of the era. Vaughan, also a singer, wrote more than a hundred hymns and gospel songs, including “The Old Country Church” and “Inside the Gate.” One source notes that he wrote “If I Could Hear My Mother Pray Again” as a tribute to his own mother, Clara Beady Burgess-Vaughan.

Thomas Andrew Dorsey was born in rural Georgia in 1899 into a family versed in both the old spirituals and shape-note singing. A natural musician, Dorsey quickly mastered the popular piano styles of the day, including the blues and “barrelhouse,” and played in clubs, brothels and at rent parties. Eventually, he ended up in Chicago and became a prolific songwriter and performer, playing the piano, writing and arranging for Ma Rainey and others. Dorsey renamed

himself Georgia Tom, formed a duo with Tampa Red (lyricist/guitarist Hudson Whittaker), and together they toured widely as the Hokum Boys. Their music, a combination of blues, ragtime, and vaudeville, coupled with slyly suggestive lyrics, became a sensation. Danceable novelty songs like "It's Tight Like That" and "Somebody's Been Using That Thing" became the basis for the short-lived "hokum" music fad.

Meanwhile, a series of personal crises led Dorsey back to his childhood faith. He wrote gospel songs, at first in the style of Charles Albert Tinley and Lucie Campbell, and later in his own voice, what biographer Michael W. Harris called "the gospel blues." Dorsey's earliest songs in the early 1920s, "If I Don't Get There," "If You See My Savior, Tell Him That You Saw Me" and "How About You," are still performed today and contain the elements of what would be called a "Dorsey song": simple, direct lyrics, syncopation, and ample breathing room for improvisation, both musically and vocally.

Dorsey turned to religious music as a vocation and with his songs, and those of Tinley, Campbell, Charles H. Pace, formed and directed several "youth choirs" on Chicago's South Side. The choirs were so popular that Dorsey founded the National Convention of Gospel Choirs and Choruses, which soon spread nationwide. In the midst of this success, Dorsey's wife Nettie and their son both died in childbirth while he was at one of his conventions. In his grief, and with the assistance of his long-time friend and singer Theodore Frye, Dorsey rewrote an old hymn into "Take My Hand, Precious Lord," the most popular gospel song of all time.

Dorsey eventually re-married and joined with Sallie Martin and Mahalia Jackson to make gospel music a national phenomenon in African American churches. Aligned with a number of impressive choirs and soloists, Dorsey himself rarely recorded though he continued to write songs that were eagerly adopted by choirs and recording artists alike, including "I'm Going to Live the Life I Sing About in My Song," "I Don't Know Why I Have to Cry Sometimes" and "If We Needed the Lord Before, We Sure Do Need Him Now." So it is curious that when someone as savvy as Dorsey about the importance of performance royalties, did choose to record in 1934, he selected a song written by someone else, "If I Could Hear My Mother Pray Again."

But Dorsey's tastes, as usual, were impeccable. Through the years, a host of gospel artists, including Mahalia Jackson, Dorothy Love Coates, the Staple Singers, and the Gay Sisters all recorded "If I Could Hear." A number of well-known country artists, including Loretta Lynn, Kitty Wells, Roy Acuff, George Jones, and Alabama have recorded it as well. Their treatments range from the stripped down country music approach of the Jenkins Family to Dorsey's slightly swinging gospel rendition.

"If I Could Hear My Mother Pray Again" also was one of the first gospel songs celebrating mothers and helped spawn a tradition among gospel artists of releasing songs on the topic: "I Remember Mama" and "No Charge" by Shirley Caesar, "A Denied Mother" by Dorothy Norwood, "Mama" by the Dixie Hummingbirds, "I Can See Everybody's Mother" by the Blind Boys of Alabama, "Living on a Mother's Prayers" by the Swan Silvertones and many others.

Dorsey continued to write and direct the National Convention of Gospel Choirs and Choruses until he was into his nineties. One of his last appearances was in the award-winning

documentary “Say Amen, Somebody” (1982), where he is shown singing, remembering the past with Sallie Martin, and directing the clearly adoring choir at a convention. Dorsey died on January 23, 1993.

(For more of Thomas A. Dorsey’s work, see also “Precious Lord: New Recordings of the Great Gospel Songs of Thomas A. Dorsey,” added to the National Registry in 2002.)

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* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.