

to Reverend Ike, but not from Father Divine to Martin Luther King, Jr. I can think of no major leader of the civil rights movement who utterly denied the reality of racial differences. Its African-American leaders knew that their leadership stemmed precisely from their identification with the African-American community. Even more telling is the fact that the movement's foot soldiers came, not from the exotic sects and cults represented by Father Divine, but from Baptist and Methodist churches of the African-American religious mainstream. It is their history that still desperately needs to be written.

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*The Rise of Gospel Blues: The Music of Thomas Andrew Dorsey in the Urban Church.* By Michael W. Harris. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991. xxiv + 324 pp. \$29.95, ISBN 0-19-506376-7.)

Thomas Dorsey, the "father" of gospel blues, has long deserved the kind of study that Michael W. Harris provides in this book, which explicates the first thirty-eight years of Dorsey's life. Dorsey cooperated with this project, granting numerous interviews and providing access to his personal papers.

Born in 1899, Dorsey began his career playing "downhome" blues piano at bordellos and parties in Atlanta. Joining the Great Migration to Chicago, he became "Georgia Tom," serving as accompanist for blues diva Ma Rainey. Along with a collaborator, he composed "low-down" blues music with lyrics replete with *double entendres*.

Focusing mainly on the 1920s and 1930s, Harris explains Dorsey's gradual transition from blues master to sacred composer (of such songs as "Take My Hand, Precious Lord") while struggling to introduce "wild" southern music into staid northern churches. Dorsey met stiff resistance from ministers and choir directors who, bent on assimilation into white culture, discouraged clapping, shouting, and other demonstrative folk practices in favor of music by Ludwig von Beethoven and Felix Mendelssohn.

Harris argues that, after innumerable fits and starts, Dorsey finally succeeded when he stopped diluting his music and "began to conceive of his songs as sermons." Inspired by the popular recorded homilies of Rev. J. M. Gates and Rev. W. M. Nix, Dorsey incorporated improvisational techniques gleaned from Nix's chanted sermons, especially the use of the "blues note" (lowered third). Dorsey also learned from his friend Rev. E. H. Hall, a "singing preacher" who stimulated enthusiastic responses from listeners. Harris's exploration of the "bluesman" and preacher as "cultural analogues of one another" is fascinating and important.

Both roles evolved from the experience of slavery and its aftermath. Offering a useful analogy, Harris compares slaves, who secretly revived themselves by singing spirituals in the woods, to urban blacks, who renewed themselves by escaping from steeped respectability to rock the walls of storefronts with gospel blues.

While Harris provides an admirably detailed chronicle of Dorsey's struggles and triumphs, he is less successful in sketching the larger political context for the religious clash between formal, Euro-American music and rural, secular-sounding blues. White assimilationist music failed in African-American churches in part because white racism forced the entire assimilationist enterprise to fail. The uninhibited joy and pain expressed in the blues—both "lowdown" and gospel—constituted, among other things, a response to unrelenting oppression from whites, who refused to accept blacks as equals no matter how often blacks played Beethoven in their churches. By blocking racial integration, whites inadvertently aided Dorsey's cause.

This reservation aside, Harris's thoroughly researched explanation of the emergence of gospel blues will reward the attention of both enthusiasts and historians. I expect that this account will become a standard work.

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