



Roberta Evelyn Martin

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‘I Have Hope’

by Victoria McAfee

Thomas A. Dorsey takes center stage as “the father of gospel music,” and many people call Mahalia Jackson “the greatest gospel singer ever.” As gospel music historian Clayton Hannah writes, “Although Dorsey is credited as the originator of gospel music, and Jackson received the highest acclaim, Roberta Martin unequivocally made the greatest contribution. She created and left a dynasty of gospel singers and a portfolio of unduplicated gospel music.”

During her musical career, she composed at least 70 songs under her own name and others under the name Fay Brown. The words of her music encouraged individuals to turn to Jesus for hope, help, and comfort—what she did herself in her last days as she battled cancer.

Roberta Martin was born Roberta Evelyn Winston on February 12, 1907, one of the six children of William and Anna Winston, in Helena, Arkansas. As a toddler, Roberta played around on the piano with her little hands and actually played identifiable melodies. As a child, she played for Sunday school as early as age six. When she was 10, her family moved to Illinois and eventually settled in Chicago, where she attended Wendell Phillips High and studied the classics under the tutelage of the school’s choir director, Mildred Bryant Jones. As a high school student, she directed the Windy City Mt. Pisgah Baptist Church choir. When she attended Northwestern University, her dream was to become a concert pianist.

However, Martin’s interest eventually changed. She later said, “I’d been playing in churches all my life... At that time I was just interested in church hymns, anthems, Christian music, and secular songs. The first time I heard gospel singing... Bertha Wise and her Singers, from Augusta, Georgia... They came to our church and oh, did we enjoy them.”

Gospel became Martin’s main focus and she played piano for the Chicago-based Young People’s Choir at Pilgrim Baptist Church, led by Thomas A. Dorsey and Theodore Frye. She and Frye established the Martin-Frye Quartet, which later became the Roberta Martin Singers. Originally the Singers included herself and four young males. Martin later added a few women members, unusual for a small vocal group. As she blended the mixed voices it created a unique gospel sound. Some of Chicago’s best male voices became part of the Singers, including Robert Anderson, Norsalus McKissick, and Eugene Smith, who wrote the gospel blues song “The Lord Will Make a Way Oh Yes, He Will.” He was manager of the Singers from 1947 until they disbanded in 1969.

The Martin group harmony made it easy to hear the background singers. The artists’ voices followed each other but not at the same time, unlike the typical quartets. Martin instituted the call-and-response technique often demonstrated in the Holiness churches. Unique in the gospel music world, each singer sang as

if performing a solo, allowing the listener to pick out each voice from the background. Her style of concentrating on the mid section of the piano is still the popular style of church organists and pianists today.

In 1939, Martin began to concentrate on the gospel music business and founded the Roberta Martin Studio of Music. The Chicago-based publishing house distributed her arrangements, as well as those of James Cleveland, Dorothy Norwood, and Alex Bradford. Martin’s company produced such popular gospel songs as “He Knows How Much We Can Bear” (1941), “Try Jesus, He Satisfies” (1943), “I’m Just Waiting on the Lord” (1953), and “God Is Still on the Throne” (1959).

In 1947, one of Martin’s music students, “Little” Lucy Smith, introduced her widowed father, James Austin, to Martin. Austin and Martin married in 1948 and had one son. Smith later became the organist and pianist for the group. A couple years later the Roberta Martin Singers signed with Bess Berman’s New York label Apollo Records and recorded “Only A Look,” by Anna Shepherd, and it became the group’s theme song.

Among those who sang with the group at one time or another were Deloris Campbell, Archie Dennis, Gloria Griffin, Myrtle Jackson, Romance Martin, Louise McCord, Myrtle Scott, James Lawrence, Dinah Washington, and Della Reese.

Around 1950, Martin cut back on engagements with the group and instead concentrated on writing and arranging music as well as running her publishing business. But she never cut back on giving to others. The business manager of the publishing house, Leona Price, said people thought Martin was wealthy but she was not, and if she had been, she would have given it all away because she was “freehearted and giving and sharing with others.”

The Martin singers earned six gold records for selling a million copies of a song or album, all Christian music. She refused to allow the ensemble to perform in the secular arenas in America, such as the Apollo Theater and Las Vegas clubs.

For the last two years of her life Martin battled cancer. In the midst of her fight she rallied and returned to record a final album with her singers. Her good friend Jessie Jameson wrote a touching song for the album, “I Have Hope,” one of the last musical pieces sung by Roberta Martin.

Martin died on January 18, 1969, in Chicago. On the day of her funeral, over 50,000 people paid their final respects as she lay in state at the Mount Pisgah Baptist Church. The U.S. Postal Service issued a postage stamp on July 15, 1998, commemorating four “queens” of gospel music: Mahalia Jackson, Clara Ward, Sister Rosetta Tharpe—and Roberta Evelyn Martin.

Perhaps her life, and especially her battle with cancer, can be summed up in the chorus of the song, “I Have Hope”:

*I have hope, when trouble comes my way
I have hope, since Jesus has come to stay
I have hope, oh yeah, when things are not well with me
I have hope, it’s a beautiful hope that sets me free.*



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