



Thomas A. Dorsey

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## Serving His Precious Lord

by Victoria Johnson

*I can't take credit for this stuff...I'm only human and these things are the making of God. I feel I've thoroughly been blessed over the years with an abundance of songs and material...There is definitely God behind this thing that I do. Everything I do—that's good, at least—is a reflection of His hand.*

Thomas Andrew Dorsey, the father of black gospel music, developed a sacred music based on the secular blues. Blues music carries a theme of defiance in the face of despair, but Dorsey's music combined that feeling and rhythm with lyrics of hope. Dorsey authored hundreds of songs, including the gospel classics "Take My Hand, Precious Lord" and "Peace in the Valley."

Dorsey was born in Villa Rica, Georgia, July 1, 1899, to Thomas Dorsey, Sr., an itinerant preacher, and Etta Dorsey, a piano player, organist, and singer. In 1908, the family moved to Atlanta and at the age of 11, Dorsey left school to take a job at a local vaudeville theater selling popcorn. In between his concession stand job he learned to play the piano by watching the entertainers. His mother owned an organ, and his relatives down the street owned a piano. Dorsey listened to songs in the theater and then came home and tinkered on the instruments until he correctly played the tune. Dorsey learned ragtime, blues, and jazz in addition to spiritual music.

In 1916 Dorsey moved to Chicago. He stayed with relatives, worked late night entertainment jobs, and attended the College of Composition for several years to learn how to read and write music.

Under the stage name "Georgia Tom," Dorsey composed his first blues song, "If You Don't Believe I'm Leaving," in 1920. He became the founder, director, and piano player for Ma Rainey's backup band, the Wild Cat Jazz Band. During that time, he recorded his blues best seller, "Tight Like That."

While living in Chicago the constant demand of late night performances, trying to promote his music, and continuing to take classes proved too much for the young man, and he fell into a deep depression. His mother traveled to Chicago to bring him back home to Atlanta, and she strongly encouraged him to give his life and talent to the Lord.

Recovering from his illness, Dorsey did write some gospel songs; however, his devotion to the Lord and commitment to Christian music was inconsistent. His efforts in gospel song writing yielded very little financially. He also faced continued opposition from the church community because of the kind of spiritual music he was attempting to introduce. It sounded too worldly for the Christian community. Later he would say, "I have been thrown out of some of the best churches in Chicago." Big checks and plenty of

opportunities opened up to him in secular music, so he attempted to do both.

This double-mindedness caused Dorsey to suffer another emotional breakdown. By this time he was married to Nettie Harper and they settled in the Chicago area. Nettie, like his mother, attempted to encourage him to commit his musical gifts totally to the Lord. She was forced to seek employment to maintain the household while Dorsey recovered. Finally, at a church service the pastor said, "Brother Dorsey, there is no reason for you to be looking so poorly and feeling badly. The Lord has too much work for you to do to let you die." Dorsey experienced a spiritual deliverance that day.

He established the Dorsey House of Music, solely for black Christian songwriters to write and produce their music. Dorsey and singer Sallie Martin cofounded the National Convention of Gospel Choirs and Choruses. Roberta Martin became the pianist for the choir that Dorsey started at Pilgrim Baptist Church in Chicago, where he was music director until 1972.

The demand for gospel type music started to explode in churches. However, during this successful time of Dorsey's life he suffered a great personal tragedy. In 1932, while in St. Louis, he received a telegram telling him to come home immediately. His wife, who was pregnant, died in childbirth. Soon after, his infant son, Thomas Dorsey, Jr., passed away as well. They buried both of his loved ones in the same casket. Dorsey barely made it through the service.

Dorsey locked himself in a room for three days with a piano. The words to "Take My Hand, Precious Lord" flowed from his broken heart. The first time Dorsey sang the song in a church service the people in the audience were overcome with emotion. He was surprised. He knew the song helped him during the loss of his family, but he had no idea it would affect and minister to so many others. His prayer and cry to the Lord became a classic, and a favorite of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.

In the 1930s he met Mahalia Jackson, and they toured together for several years. In 1937 he wrote for her the classic, "Peace in the Valley." Sallie Martin helped promote his publishing house, and it was so successful that sheet music copies of any gospel piece became known as "Dorseys."

Dorsey traveled and trained upcoming young singers and wrote a book about his life. He was the first black elected to the Nashville Songwriters International Hall of Fame. At one point he served as Dean of Evangelistic Musical Research and Ministry of Church Music for the Gospel Choral Union of Chicago.

Thomas Andrew Dorsey died on January 23, 1993. He once described his blending of the blues and gospel in this way: "If a woman has lost a man, a man has lost a woman, his feeling reacts to the blues; he feels like expressing it. The same thing acts for a gospel song. Now you're not singing blues; you're singing gospel, a good news song, singing about the Creator; but it's the same feeling, a grasping of the heart."



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