

The Gospel Roots of Rock Music

Christians have always been a singing people. They had been directed to sing *spiritual songs* in the New Testament. As a result, the term *spiritual* was given to the religious folk songs sung by both the white and African-American Christian. But, the style sung by the African-American was vastly different from the style sung by the white Christian.

The original spiritual song was not written down and it is very difficult to determine exactly what it would have sounded like. Whites sang spirituals in prearranged structures referred to as *part singing*. The African-American, on the other hand improvised melody, harmony, and rhythms. Lead singers often slid from one note to the next and they sang *turns* around the melody notes, creating ornaments around various notes. Frequently, a leader would improvise the melody and its text while a group of singers in the background would sing the basic melody. Sometimes, the lead singer would sing a line that would be repeated or answered by the larger group. This technique was referred to as *call-response*.

Texts of the spirituals might be referred to as *sorrow songs* if they carried a sad message, i.e. *Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen*. If the text was happy, they might be called *jubilees*, i.e. *Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel?* The jubilee might also be more energetic. Regardless of the type of message in the song, both types often included code words letting the slave know when might be a safe time for them to escape and where they might escape to. This was a very important aspect of the Underground Railroad.

Spirituals have been polished and arranged and sung and recorded by high school and college groups for many years.

Gospel Music

Gospel music comes from some of the same roots as the spiritual but it is also related to the blues. The scale structures that were important in the blues are also a significant part of gospel music. The blues expressed an individual singer's thoughts and emotions, but gospel music expressed the thoughts of a worshiping people.

The slaves were taken to the white man's churches and there they learned the songs of the white man. When not in church, these were adapted to the African-American musical traditions. After the Civil War, the African-American built their own churches and were free to worship using their own musical preferences.

The call-response form that had been developed much earlier would be adapted into the church service by having the preacher call out a phrase while the congregation would respond to that phrase. There would be much dancing in the aisles, clapping, and shouting. Sometimes, the preacher would get into the song so much that they would faint---being moved by the spirit.

While the simple call-response technique was being employed in churches, a more complex style was being developed by professional singers. These styles included the harmonized and crisp rhythmic flow of the old hymns and adapted these to the energetic spirituals. Many of these groups included only four or five singers, frequently singing *a cappella*. As popular as these small groups were, the larger groups that included full choirs were also becoming very popular. One such group was popularized by Edwin Hawkins in Oakland, CA during the 60's. Hawkins used a large choir and accompanied it with keyboards, bass, and drums. The **Edwin Hawkins Singers** performed gospel songs that became hits on the pop charts.

Listen to The Edwin Hawkins Singers---Oh Happy Day

Doo-Wop

Listen to The Mills Brothers---Pennies from Heaven

Listen to The Ink Spots---It's a Sin to Tell a Lie

Secular music sung by gospel-oriented African-Americans was popular as early as the 20's. The term *doo-wop* came to be used to identify the vocal group sound. The groups usually had a lead singer who was accompanied by other singers who sang nonsense syllables---doo-wops. Two early groups whose influences could be heard in later doo-wop style were **The Mills Brothers** and **The Ink Spots**. Many groups began to copy The Mills Brothers and The Ink Spots. One of these groups was **The Orioles**. Their sound depended on a light tenor lead similar to the Ink Spots. Their recording of *Crying in the Chapel* was one of the first by an African-American group that was successful on the pop charts. The Orioles broke up in 1954, but their style was copied by many other groups.

It continued to be common for covers of African-American groups made by white groups to make it to the pop charts. One of the most well known examples of this is *Sh-Boom*, recorded first by the Chords, a black group, then covered by The Crew-Cuts, a white group from Canada.

Listen to Sh-Boom, first by The Chords, then by the Crew-Cuts.

The chord progression found in *Sh-Boom* (I-vi-ii-V-I) was the harmonic basis for many doo-wop songs and became known as the *doo-wop progression*.

Another musical characteristic found in a lot of doo-wop music is the constant pounding of repeated chords in the piano.

Two important doo-wop groups were **The Platters** and **The Drifters**. The Drifters were called that because the members tended to drift from group to group. A lead bass was important to The Drifters. The Drifters broke through the pop charts with their recording of *There Goes My Baby*. It was not the first to use a full string section, but it was the first

R&B recording to use such a full, thick background. This became a trend in the early 60's.

Listen to The Drifters---There Goes My Baby

Most doo-wop groups were geared toward the adult audience. **Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers** broke that mold, catering to the teens. Lymon was only 13 when they first recorded their big hit, *Why Do Falls Fall in Love?*

Listen to Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers---Why Do Fools Fall in Love?

Lymon attempted a solo career, but was unsuccessful. After several years of heroin addiction, he died of an overdose at the age of 25.

The general style of doo-wop music was consistent, smoothly romantic, danceable rhythms in which the lead singers often used gospel singing devices. This style eventually gave way to other, more gutsy, styles. Gospel and doo-wop are well, however, and can be heard in the music of Amy Grant, Take 6, All 4 One, Boyz to Men, etc.