

D-VineSpirituals.mp3

Alphonso Saville [00:00:10] Hello, this is Alphonso Saville, Associate Research Scholar with The Crossroads Project at Princeton University. Thanks for listening to “D-Vine Spirituals: Sacred Sound in Memphis,” which explores the world of black sacred music in Memphis, Tennessee. In this story, you'll hear Memphis gospel musicians reflect on how the sound of gospel music in Memphis has been shaped by diverse musical, social, and cultural traditions. Our story starts at the Memphis Listening Lab, which its website describes as a curated collection of music and music history located in the Crosstown Concourse Building in Memphis.

Jim Cole [00:00:54] We opened in July of 2021. We had a group of people that got together, and they wanted to bring a nonprofit music library to the Crosstown Concourse Building.

Alphonso Saville [00:01:05] That's Jim Cole, lead archivist and one of the curators of the music collection at the Memphis Listening Lab. In addition to being a repository for music and music history, it also provides a forum for music education, appreciation, and performances.

Jim Cole [00:01:23] Where they can listen to albums and individual listening stations. We've got a small production room where, we have a station for, doing digital music editing, and there's a turntable so you can make samples from the collection. There is a station for podcasting, and that's all free for the public. You just reserve time and come in, and then, where we're sitting now is our sound room, which was, this room was, built from the ground up by some audio engineers as a listening room. So we have a lot of local artists come to this room and have record release events. We'll do, you know, workshops, things like that in here. Those are all free public events.

Alphonso Saville [00:02:01] I asked Jim to say a bit more about some of the gospel music in the library's collection.

Jim Cole [00:02:08] As far as collections we're having, you know, bits of stuff trickling in. We're getting, record labels like Fat Possum. You know, send us a few hundred albums. There's not a huge collection of gospel, but there are some, some of the small, independent Memphis label stuff.

Alphonso Saville [00:02:23] What are some of the names of some of those smaller labels?

Jim Cole [00:02:26] Well, probably the best is the, Designer label. That's, Style Wooten. It was a custom label where anyone could come there, pay a fee, record two songs you would get, you know, 300-500 45s . And then, it was up to you to sell them. So a lot of those never even made it into stores. They were just sold it at churches and things. And, he put out hundreds of those. I mean, it was a really, really interesting little venture, but he had a number of labels outside of Designer, which was kind of geared towards black gospel music. That, that's probably the main one. But there's been a lot of them that have come and gone and, you know, of course the just the 50s was such a great period for gospel music in Memphis, you know, and The Spirit of Memphis Quartet, the Pattersonaires, and and those people were really huge, you know. So there was Memphis was a really big gospel town.

Alphonso Saville [00:03:27] To better understand Jim's answer, I asked him to reflect on musical forms found within the genre of black sacred sound.

Alphonso Saville [00:03:36] How would you define the musical genre: Spiritual?

Jim Cole [00:03:40] Spiritual? Wow. I guess that can mean a lot of things, but when I hear spiritual, I immediately think of black gospel music. Although many things can be spiritual, of course. But yeah, if I had to say this is what immediately comes to mind.

Alphonso Saville [00:03:57] Jim assured me that while he was no expert on black sacred music, he knew just who I should speak to. He connected me with Reverend Juan Shipp. Reverend Shipp is the host of "Gospel Talk Back in the Day," a radio program that features traditional and contemporary local gospel on Saturday mornings. He also founded D-Vine Spirituals, a record label that recorded gospel music in Memphis during the 1960s and 70s. Along with acts such as Elder Ward and The Gospel Four, the Joy of Memphis, The Traveling Stars, and soloist Elizabeth King, the D-Vine Spirituals label became known for pioneering a unique sound that fused traditional gospel with blues and R&B-- a unique innovation in the sonic landscape of black sacred music.

Alphonso Saville [00:04:51] I sat down with Shipp and King, the labels most prominently featured artist, to pose some of the same questions to them about the legacy of black sacred music in Memphis.

Alphonso Saville [00:05:03] What is a spiritual?

Juan Shipp [00:05:06] When you are talking about spirituals, the first thing that comes to mind is your connection with a god. And I think anyone that has a spiritual outlook, period, he's got a god somewhere. Whether it be a god--the only God, or one that is passed down from generations, whatever it may be. And that's what spiritual means to me.

Elizabeth King [00:05:36] Well, I think, spiritual, like I said, is getting in touch with their power. And it's this secret, the depths of your soul and your soul, the mind. Because, you know, they say the heart, out of the heart flows the issues of life. And when you become spiritual, you have something to guide you. It's something that really, it keep you in touch with a higher power. That's what I feel is spiritual.

Alphonso Saville [00:06:17] The music, the singing, the practice of singing...

Elizabeth King [00:06:18] Yeah. The singing. And I remember, you know, like when I was young and they had this song that "I was way down yonder by myself, and I couldn't hear nobody pray." And I would think, we'd be chopping cotton and all that stuff, we'd be way down, hot sweat running out. And then you start calling on the Lord Jesus. And it looked like the power just, you know, give you the strength to go on. That's my spiritual.

Damien Savage [00:06:51] When I think about spirituals, I think about slavery.

Alphonso Saville [00:06:55] That's Damien Savage, minister of music here in Memphis and also a former road musician for the acclaimed recording artists Earth, Wind and Fire and Memphis legend Isaac Hayes. I thought Damien's perspective would be informative, given his extensive career as a musician in both religious and non-religious settings.

Damien Savage [00:07:16] The songs that got us through. All you had was your thoughts and your hopes of something better than what you have right now. And then moreover, when I think about how clever they were, a lot of those spirituals were cryptic messages. Mane you thinking about folks they can't even read, but they wrote songs--meaningful songs. Meaningful songs that also had a cryptic message in it, too. Clock strike midnight, we outta here doc, we hitting it. We hitting the river doc...get the smell off you. So the dogs won't smell you. You know what I mean? You know, wade in the water. Why? To get the smell off you. So massa's dogs won't know you, know what I mean? And I was like, that's cold blooded, mane!

Damien Savage [00:08:16] So, spirituals it's something. It's a song. Uplifting. Uplifting songs for them. Something for their hope to feed off of, you know, because hope needs food. You know, something for their, you know, just to settle my thoughts. Music...music, a song and it's also got a message of how I'm finna lead my folks to freedom. How I'm going to help my people.

Alphonso Saville [00:08:55] Like King, Ship and Savage were able to identify specific songs from the sacred tradition they found particularly inspiring.

Juan Shipp [00:09:05] Believe it or not, I have a favorite song too, although I can't sing. But mine is "Nobody Knows." Nobody knows the trouble I've seen.

Damien Savage [00:09:16] I guess I would say, I guess one of my favorite spirituals would be...I like, "Keep your Lamps Oiled and Burnin." I like...they got this one, "I Done Done What He Told Me to Do." I'll say, "Swing Low," because that's almost pop. You know.

Alphonso Saville [00:09:42] All of the interviewees noted the impact of family on shaping their early appreciation for black sacred music.

Damien Savage [00:09:49] My grandmother, my grandmother started me out playing piano. And really, she couldn't play a note, but she knew the notes on the piano, and she could read rhythms, and she, taught me, taught me my notes and how to count simple rhythms. And then I started taking lessons. But, so my mom was a piano player. She, she...her degree is, actually, in piano. But, yeah, they didn't have to force me to do it, I wanted to do it, I wanted to do it. I really had a desire. Sometimes the practice schedules I didn't really like because my grandmom was one of those. She was like you, "If you gone do this, you gone do it."

Alphonso Saville [00:10:36] A stickler for stickler for the schedule...

Damien Savage [00:10:36] Yeah yeah yessir.

Alphonso Saville [00:10:39] The communities of faith that passed down the sacred musical tradition were also important for shaping their performative voices.

Damien Savage [00:10:49] So, yeah, just growing up, yeah, it was definitely...It was definitely church. Definitely church was the first crowd I would say that I ever played in front of. Every time they had anything that could showcase, you know, one of the youth playing the piano. You know, so I always had that experience. Every year at Easter, "well, so we want Damien to play something."

Alphonso Saville [00:11:24] King first honed her musical talents, singing alongside her mother in the choir and then as part of her brothers' gospel chorale. Later, she passed on the gift of music to her own children, cultivating their appreciation for black sacred sound.

Elizabeth King [00:11:39] Three years old, I was singing with my mom and, so, you know, they usually have a children choir, but I always stayed with my mom, so she always take me to the choir with her. So I sung with my mom. Go home, then my family, my brothers, they started a group and I would sing with them. My mama let me sing with them until I became a teenager. But then, I couldn't go with my big brothers. I had to stay at home. But I continued to sing solo, and I've been singing ever since. And then when, my children...I started having my children. My husband was a pastor and, and all of my team was the choir. 15 children.

Alphonso Saville [00:12:30] Oh wow...Wow!!! I missed that in the liner notes...I didn't read that. I missed that one.

Speaker 6 [00:12:36] So we, we stayed, I stayed. And after I left Pastor Shipp and I just been singing all my...most of my life.

Alphonso Saville [00:12:50] With two new album releases in the last several years, King's musical career, one that has spanned more than 50 years, has seen a recent resurgence. But despite her longevity, she's never strayed from her gospel foundation.

Elizabeth King [00:13:06] I just always been one that, I wasn't jumping from one, you know, like...Some singers can sing good all on the weekends, the blues. And then come on Sunday morning ready to shout, and all that stuff. I'm not into that. My mind was totally on one thing. I love good old gospel music. And I love those old hymnals. And that's what I love. And that's what soothes my soul.

Alphonso Saville [00:13:42] During his early years, Reverend Shipp explored diverse musical styles as his own taste developed, but he was careful to hide some of his interests from his parents.

[00:13:52] And what really made me want to really go into nightclubs was because the Starlight Revue and all that and bring it to Memphis. They had the gospel first, and then the blues come on later. And the ones that came for the gospel stayed to hear the blues. Because it's the same thing. When I was growing up I was in the band at Geeter (High School). And as I got to the 11th and 12th grade, I formed a little jazz band, and we used to play for all of the proms and all that kind of different schools and benefits and stuff. Although my mom and dad didn't know it. Now I came from a religious family as well. My dad was a preacher and pastor and my mom was a first lady. She oh, my mom, she was stricter than my dad. Now my dad, if we played funny cards and that kind of stuff, he wouldn't mind it. But, mom? Oh, it's a sermon in that. Better not catch you...and don't shoot no marbles either!

Alphonso Saville [00:14:52] Damien Savage's grandmother was strongly opposed to him playing non-religious music. In fact, her strong oppositional stance nearly cost him a golden opportunity.

Damien Savage [00:15:04] But my grandmother, my grandmama, was the one that she did not, she didn't want to me playing secular music, you know, she was one of those I mean, you know, we couldn't...you definitely couldn't listen to "devil" music in her house.

You know, we couldn't even play cards. Not Uno. We couldn't play Uno. "Get those cards outta here!" She talked and talked and talked about me playing for Isaac...to the point where I didn't even answer the phone when Benny called.

Alphonso Saville [00:15:39] In case you missed it, his grandmother didn't want him to play for Isaac, as in Memphis soul recording legend, Isaac Hayes. Savage wouldn't challenge his grandmother, but a family member eventually intervened.

Damien Savage [00:15:55] He called all day and I was there so finally my auntie called me, and she said, "Benny said he been calling you. What are you doing over there?" you know, all this kind of stuff. And I said, "Granny said she don't want me playing for the world, and da-da-da-da-da-da-da." Next thing I know, I hear Granny's phone ringing. So, they talked on the phone. I don't know what was said. It was a good ten minutes they talked on the phone. Next thing I know, my grandma came in and she said, "Gone and call that man back." And walked back out of the room. So I went on and called Benny. But she did not want me, she didn't want me playing secular music.

Alphonso Saville [00:16:35] Shipp also continued to explore diverse musical sounds throughout his life. A fact that, in part, explains the unique gospel-blues sound of the D-Vine Spirituals label.

Juan Shipp [00:16:46] But now I also was one of the first back in the day, in the 70s. You know, they would put certain things on blues songs and all that. And there was a wah-wah...

Alphonso Saville [00:17:05] "Wah-wah" is Memphis 70s slang for the electric guitar, which was commonly used in blues and later funk musical arrangements.

Juan Shipp [00:17:13] There was the one little fellow. He played the wah-wah. I heard that I said, oh, that'll sound good on gospel music. And one of my friends say, "Man, you going to put that on the gospel?" I said, "I sure am." I say, "everything that has to breath ought to praise the Lord." So it doesn't matter what it is: the saxophone, the trumpet, the guitar, whatever it is. And I put it on there... I'll tell you the truth, my songs were more richer than any other in this area! And I think that's what really caused Bruce Watson to hear it, because he listened at some of the tapes that I had produced back then, and he just fell in love with it. And bingo!

Alphonso Saville [00:17:58] The fusion of traditional gospel with elements of blues rhythms and instrumentations would come to define the Memphis gospel sound, and remain a recognizable feature for decades to come.

Alphonso Saville [00:18:11] When you listened to the songs that were in the D-Vine Spirituals collection, what were you some of your initial impressions?

Damien Savage [00:18:21] Well, first of all, I didn't...And maybe you maybe you said it, but, I didn't know she was from Memphis.

Alphonso Saville [00:18:37] Elizabeth King.

Damien Savage [00:18:38] Yeah Elizabeth King. I didn't know she was from Memphis. And so I'm listening to this, I was like, my God, this woman sounds like she's from Memphis. When I went to the Listening Lab, man. I'm all in my phone. Elizabeth King...bio.

And then before I even clicked on anything, you know how they show you a little thumbnail, a little bit of it. And I saw Memphis. I said, "I knew it!"

Alphonso Saville [00:19:05] Because his musical career included playing for both sacred and secular audiences. I asked Savage about the crossroads of genres at which elements of blues and gospel come together to create new sounds.

Damien Savage [00:19:21] I always say that music is music. I can tell you about when I moved to Tucson, I was Minister Music for Ricky (Richard) Hartman. So we had this lady, this lady in the choir. And this lady just had a serious problem with me playing for Isaac Hayes and coming in here and being our minister of music and talking about the Bible in here. And I said, "Isaac Hayes is s a job. That's a job." I said, "Where do you work?" "At the post office." I said, "What church does your boss go to?" "I don't know." "Does your job directly glorify God in any way?" "No, but how else am I gonna earn..." Thank you. Isaac Hayes is a job. And that job requires me to play his music. Can we appreciate? Can we appreciate the music? I don't let the sacred songs point a finger at the secular songs and say, "Y'all ain't worthy of him listening because you're not talking about Jesus. You're not talking about God. You're not talking about religion." No, you don't look down. That's still music over there, and it's awesome music! And it's music that all came from the same place. You know, and it's all music. That's one thing about it. All of it is music. It's just got a different adjective in front of it.

Alphonso Saville [00:21:07] Reverend Shipp also hopes to capitalize on the crossover appeal of the D-Vine Spirituals sound to attract non-religious audiences.

Juan Shipp [00:21:15] Now, I have always wanted to sing gospel in the nightclub. That's what I want to do. And I was amazed we got a chance to send Liz (Elizabeth King) to Paris. She got a chance to sing in nightclubs.

Elizabeth King [00:21:38] Something I never, I had never been in nightclubs. I was always afraid to go in places like that because I was scared of people that drink. And so. But when we were in Paris, over there, every place we went to was a nightclub. But boy I got a chance to bring the water out they eyes!

Juan Shipp [00:22:01] Right, right, right! And another thing. She was in the Mempho Fest, this past year, and, she was doing great. And then all of a sudden, I mean, everybody was enjoying and everything, it was fine. All of a sudden, all electricity, the generator just -- poop! Went out. No microphones or nothing. And because of her abilities of singing, with or without, she was able to tell everybody "Come a little closer. It's not going to stop us from singing." And she sang a good, slow, beautiful number. And you could see tears coming from their eyes. Now, this is out in a great big park. You could see the tears. I mean, it was fantastic.

Elizabeth King [00:22:51] The song was "Since I found the Christ."

Juan Shipp [00:22:53] And so, you know, I admire her because she sings from her heart.

Alphonso Saville [00:23:01] While Elizabeth King is adamant that she only performs gospel, she recognizes that gospel music is shaped by diverse musical genres and appreciates how that diversity contributes to innovations in music.

Elizabeth King [00:23:16] Because, like I tell everybody, music is just music, and they'll say "Well, did your children play music in the house?" Yeah. "What did they play?" I said, "They played music." Because really, I don't, I don't know music. You know what I mean? I don't play music. And my son, he played bass guitar, lead, you know, all my kids was musically inclined. But I didn't tell them, "You can't play B.B. King." I didn't tell them that because on Sunday mornings, that's who's playing for the choir. The same people playing in the club, playing in the choir. I has nothing to do with nobody else's soul, it's my soul.

Juan Shipp [00:24:03] There you go.

Elizabeth King [00:24:04] So, that's the way I always tell my children. Whatever you gone do, make sure that you doing it from your soul. Because your soul is the one that's gone be lost or saved.

Alphonso Saville [00:24:27] Research for this project was funded by a fellows grant from The Crossroads Project, a collaborative research initiative directed by Judith Weisenfeld, Anthea Butler, and Lerone Martin, and supported by the Henry Luce Foundation and Princeton University. All music excerpts from this story were originally recorded on the D-Vine Spirituals label, and are available for streaming and purchase at all streaming platforms. Special thanks to Judith Weisenfeld, the Henry Luce Foundation, and the Memphis Listening Lab. And thanks to you for listening.