Richard Smallwood

Black American gospel music and the blues are both important forms of urban vocal music that have evolved from rural folk origins. Elements of the blues are basic to the jazz tradition while elements of gospel style can be heard in the singing of most contemporary rhythm and blues and soul singers. Yet gospel and the blues have retained their own distinct identities. Blues singer Alberta Hunter has been quoted as saying, "To me, the blues are—well, almost religious. . . . The blues are like spirituals, almost sacred. When we sing the blues, we're singin' from our hearts, we're singin' out our feelings." But gospel singer Mahalia Jackson held that "anybody that sings the blues is in a deep pit yelling for help." She argued that the blues do not evidence hope, whereas gospel music means "good news." Because contemporary gospel music has developed out of the tradition of the spirituals, we may conclude that these distinctions between the religious character of gospel songs and the worldliness of the blues remain valid.

The most significant characteristic of both gospel and blues is their inherent improvisational quality. Singers of both gospel and blues are expected to elaborate on the often simple melodies to achieve disjunct, chromatic effects. The most skillful contemporary performers of gospel and blues are musicians who have listened extensively to recordings or who were born and raised near the sources of these traditions. Young gospel singers and pianists still usually learn their techniques in churches, where they are permitted to perform with choirs and other groups while they learn to hone their improvisational skills.

Jazz analyst Jerry Coker has singled out five factors—intuition, intellect, emotion, sense of pitch, and habit—that influence the degree of success one can expect in learning to improvise in any style. A beginning improviser must possess some basic musicianship, whether formally or informally acquired. Fortunately for the blues or gospel singer, this basic talent does not mandate a beautiful singing voice in the traditional sense, but rather one that can develop the expressive qualities unique to black vocal timbre. An operatic vocal production and timbre cannot authentically create the earthy quality necessary to gospel and blues. Sincere feeling and emotional expression are more important than breathing technique or a pretty sound. Jackson breathed between the syllables of words and was known for sliding to and from pitches at will. The Rev. James Cleveland has been called the Louis Armstrong of gospel because of the hoarse, smokey quality of his voice and his limited range. However, both singers are recognized as two of the finest stylists in the gospel tradition. Similarly, gospel and blues pianists are noted for a loud, percussive technique and style.

Blues improvisation

Traditional blues is usually a song form in the familiar twelve-measure AAB pattern; however, there are instrumental blues played as accompaniments or as solos. In vocal blues a singer sings during the first two measures of the first line and is answered by an accompanying instrument. Often a singer will sing the first line of a blues verse "straight," that is, without any improvisation. During the "break" (the instrumental response) the accompanist embroiders an answering phrase. When the singer returns to repeat the first line again, he or she traditionally makes a slight spontaneous variation of the melodic line for emphasis and expressive purposes. In turn, the accompanist creates an improvised response, always in the spirit and mood of the blues expression of the singer. The concluding line, "B," must bring the idea home to the listener. A skillful blues singer must create melodic, rhythmic, and textural interest. Figure 1 shows a simple blues melody in an AAB pattern. An improviser could elaborate by adding to the melody, subtracting from the melody, suspending certain notes over several rhythmic pulses, and inverting the melody.

A significant part of vocal blues improvisation is the ability to ad lib appropriate new verses. One need not be a lyricist to compose or freely improvise a blues verse since the first line always is repeated and the third line rhymes with the first and repeated line. A blues singer invariably will improvise upon the given lyric of a song by adding phrases of his or her own.

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Repetition of words and syllables adds emphasis and intensity to a blues line. With experience a singer may wish to add an appropriate growl, holler, or other vocal utterance to further dramatize the words.

Genuine blues flavor in vocal or instrumental improvisation is achieved through the judicious incorporation of "blue notes" (flatted third, fifth, and seventh scale steps). The traditional I–IV–V progressions that accompany blues melodies are frequently combined with these flatted pitches to produce distinctive seventh chords (I7, IV7, and so on).

In piano blues or boogie woogie, basic ostinato patterns traditionally have been played in the bass with infinite variation possibilities in the right hand (see Figure 2).

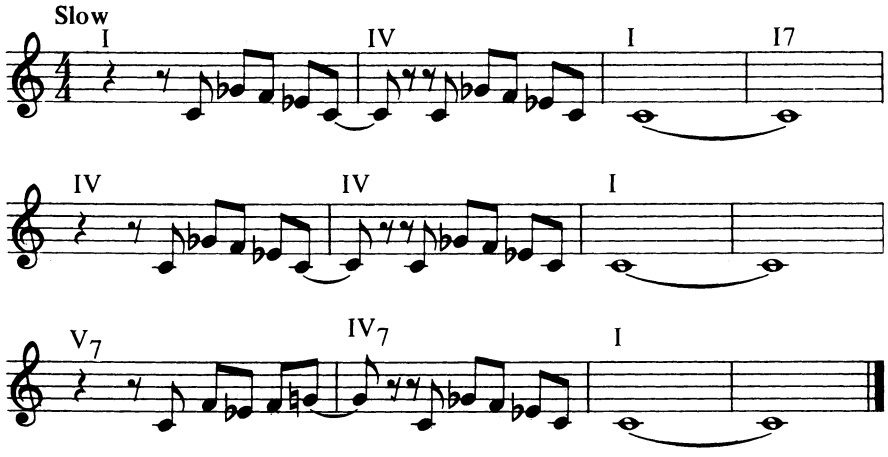

Figure 1. *Blues vocal line*

Gospel improvisation

To a casual listener only insignificant differences may seem to exist between the sounds of black secular blues and black gospel. Unfortunately, so many rhythm and blues and soul singers have taken the gospel style out of the church, merely changing the lyrics, that listeners are justifiably confused as to the difference between "my Lord" and "my baby." Admittedly, many forms of black music share common elements such as blue notes, syncopated rhythms, and patterns of call and response; however, the stylistic use of these basic elements are crucial factors in defining the distinctions between one idiom and another.

Because there are more stylistic variations in gospel music than in traditional blues, the problems of singing and accompanying gospel music are more complex. Gospel singing is more than having interesting variations on a melody; it involves phrasing, breathing, vocal intensity, timbre, and, above all, the indefinable and inimitable quality of conviction. Gospel technique and skill in improvisation ideally should be the servant of the message. The greatest gospel performers such as Jackson and Cleveland have a spiritual quality in their singing, conveyed by virtuosic textual improvisations, arresting rhythmic timing, and powerful phrasing.

The fundamental differences between blues improvisation and gos-

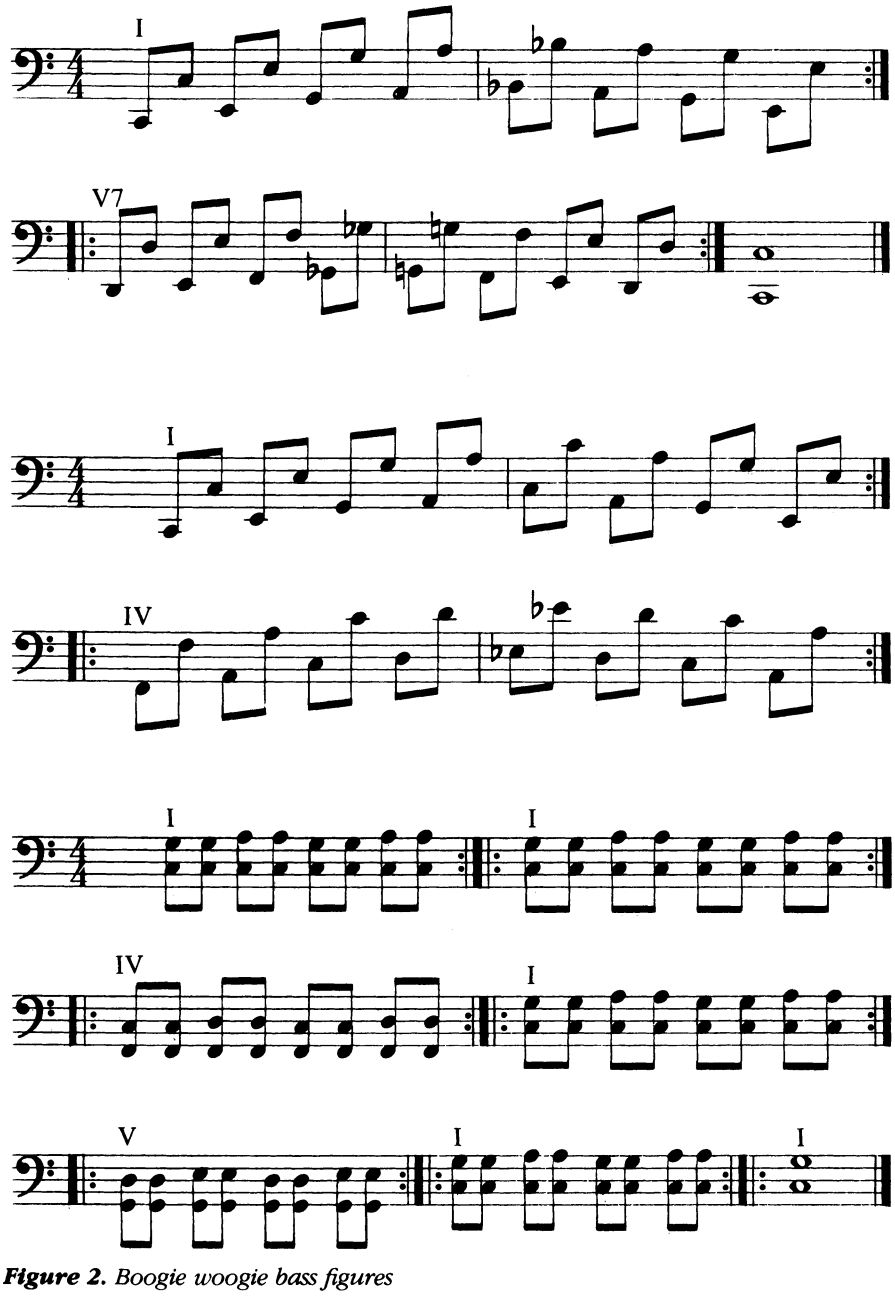

Figure 2. *Boogie woogie bass figures*

pel improvisation are the different scales used by each and the differences in the structures of the songs. Blues improvisation is based upon the blues scale (a diatonic scale with lowered third, fifth, and seventh degrees). Gospel tends toward the use of pentatonic scales. Classic blues form is most often in an AAB pattern, whereas gospel uses the hymn structure of verse and chorus, with occasional vamps and variations of the basic chorus structure.

Horace Clarence Boyer has described gospel improvisation as follows.

> The melody of a gospel song is subjected to a variety of interpolations and additions which can best be explained as ornamentations. They are most commonly associated with the singing of individual soloists, or the soloist backed by a choir. . . . The simplest of these ornaments is the ascending or descending passing tone, one which is interpolated between two tones a third apart. . . . The bend requires the singer to "play" with the last note in a line or phrase by adding one tone, either above or below what was originally the final tone. . . . The "gruppetto" calls for executing several tones in rapid succession, either in conjunct (stepwise) or disjunct (separated) motion.[1]

Figure 3 shows an example of how a gospel vocal line can be embellished and reworked.

Syncopated hand-clapping is an integral part of gospel performance. There are many intricate hand claps, but most of them rely on off beats: the foot taps on beats one and three, and the hands clap on beats two and four. In other rhythmic variations, the foot taps on one, and the hands clap on two and three (the first beat receives the accent).

Piano accompaniment in gospel music not only assists the singer but aids in the rhythmic definition of the song. Roberta Martin created the first definitive gospel piano style, which differed markedly from the barrelhouse, blues, and boogie woogie piano styles of the thirties. Boyer writes that "Miss Martin was careful with harmonic and dynamic nuances. . . . she stressed three elements in her playing: richer harmonies (including secondary dominants and seventh chords) connected by single-note motives in the right hand; percussive-like 'bomb' in octaves assigned to the left hand; and a less rigid but at the same time more complex rhythmic use of chords."[2] In analyzing the distinction between fast gospel accompaniment and slow gospel accompaniment, Boyer notes that unmetered song "requires a special kind of gospel piano style. The pianist is required to reiterate or arpeggiate chords in the right hand, while the left hand plays a 'murky' bass or broken octaves in fast succession, all in free rhythm. Because the harmonic rhythm is slow, the pianist is expected to use many non-harmonic tones by appoggiatura chords."

For the student of contemporary gospel, the sheet music of Andrae Crouch and Walter Hawkins offers valuable gospel chord progressions that may be used as the basis for further personal improvisation by the student of gospel piano style (see Figure 4).

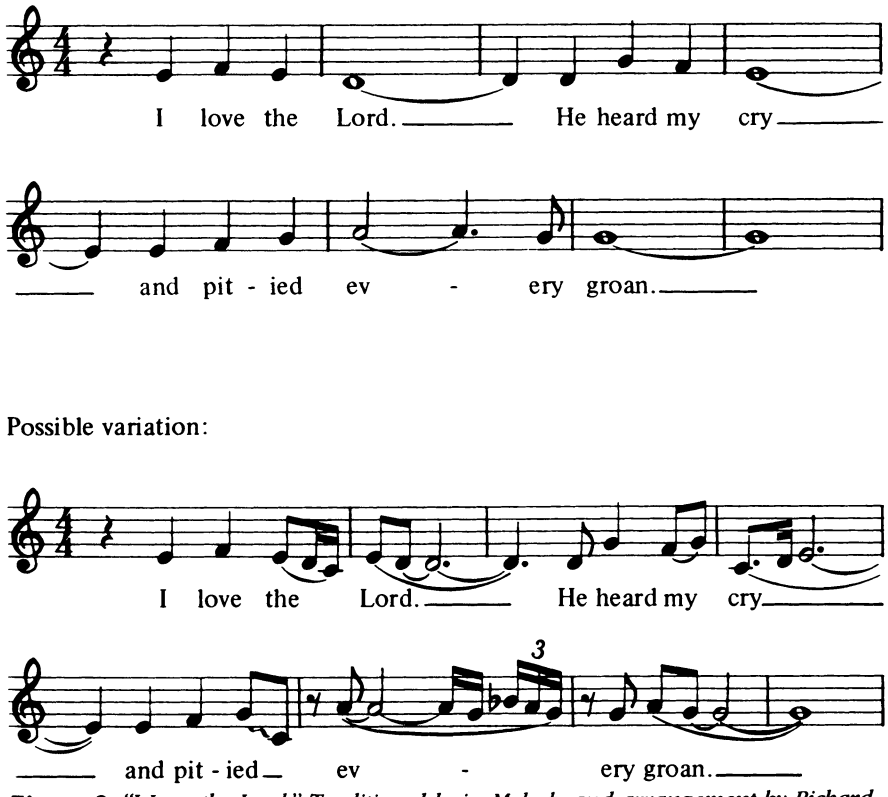

Figure 3. *"I Love the Lord." Traditional lyric. Melody and arrangement by Richard Smallwood.*

Listening and learning

When a student has listened extensively to the kind of blues or gospel music he or she wishes to create, and when he has diligently practiced the patterns and phrases to be incorporated in the style, then his individuality must find room to express itself. Self-discovery emerges with time and experience. Instrumental and vocal improvisation in gospel is always subject to the moving of the spirit—which means that performers must be certain their skills will permit the unexpected. In blues improvisation, pure emotional involvement, which parallels the spiritual involvement in gospel, also may take the performer into variations or changes that are wholly unplanned. It is interesting to study early recordings of major artists, made when they were perhaps under the influence of their own mentors or idols; for example, Shirley Caesar's recordings with the Caravans or Miles Davis' work with Dizzy Gillespie's groups in the forties. Later recordings and performances by these artists reveal their individualism and improvisational development as they came into their own style.

[1] Horace Clarence Boyer, "Contemporary Gospel," *The Black Perspective in Music* 7, no. 1 (Spring 1979): 24. Used with permission.

[2] Ibid., p. 32. Used with permission.

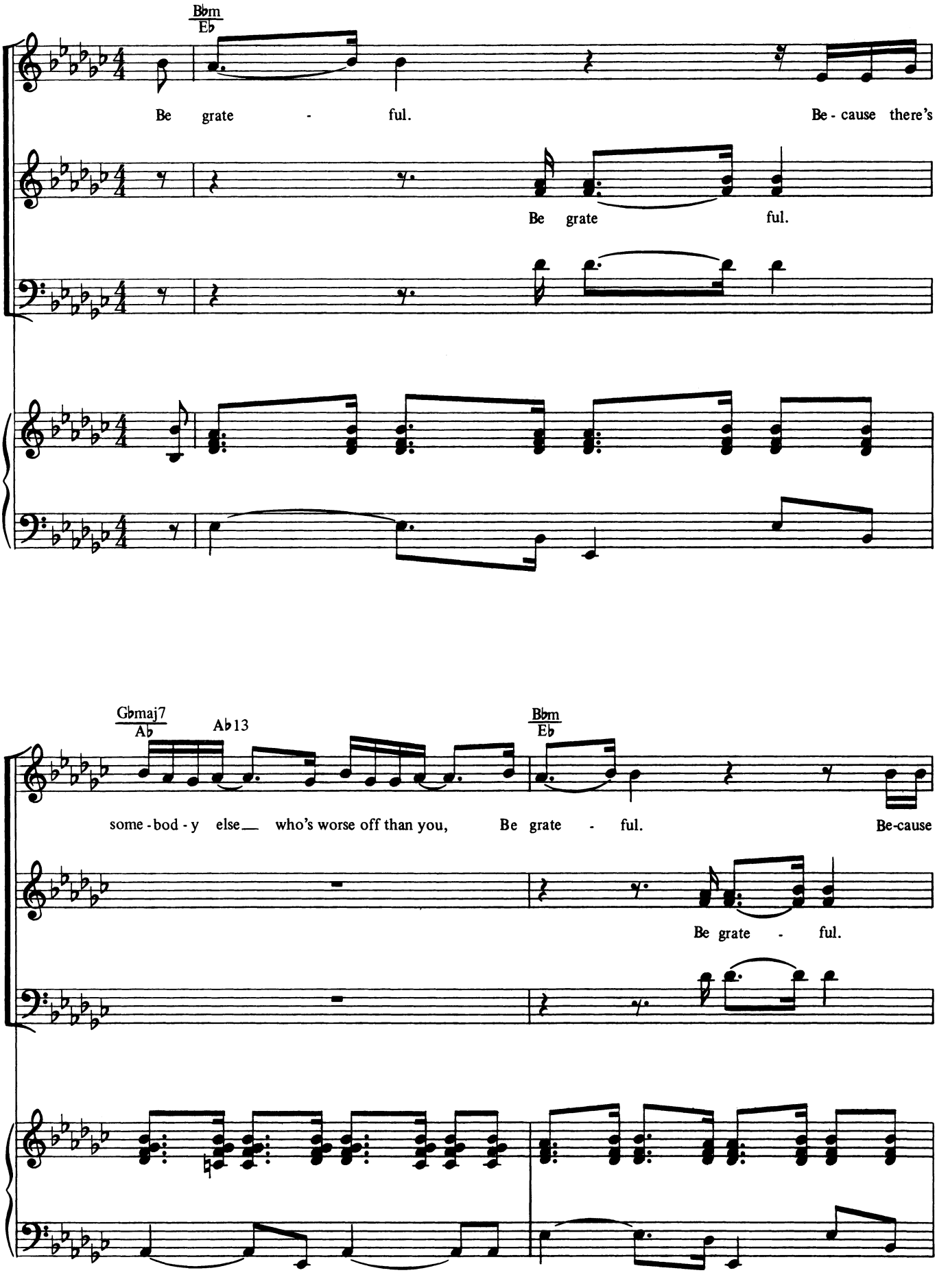

Figure 4 continues next page

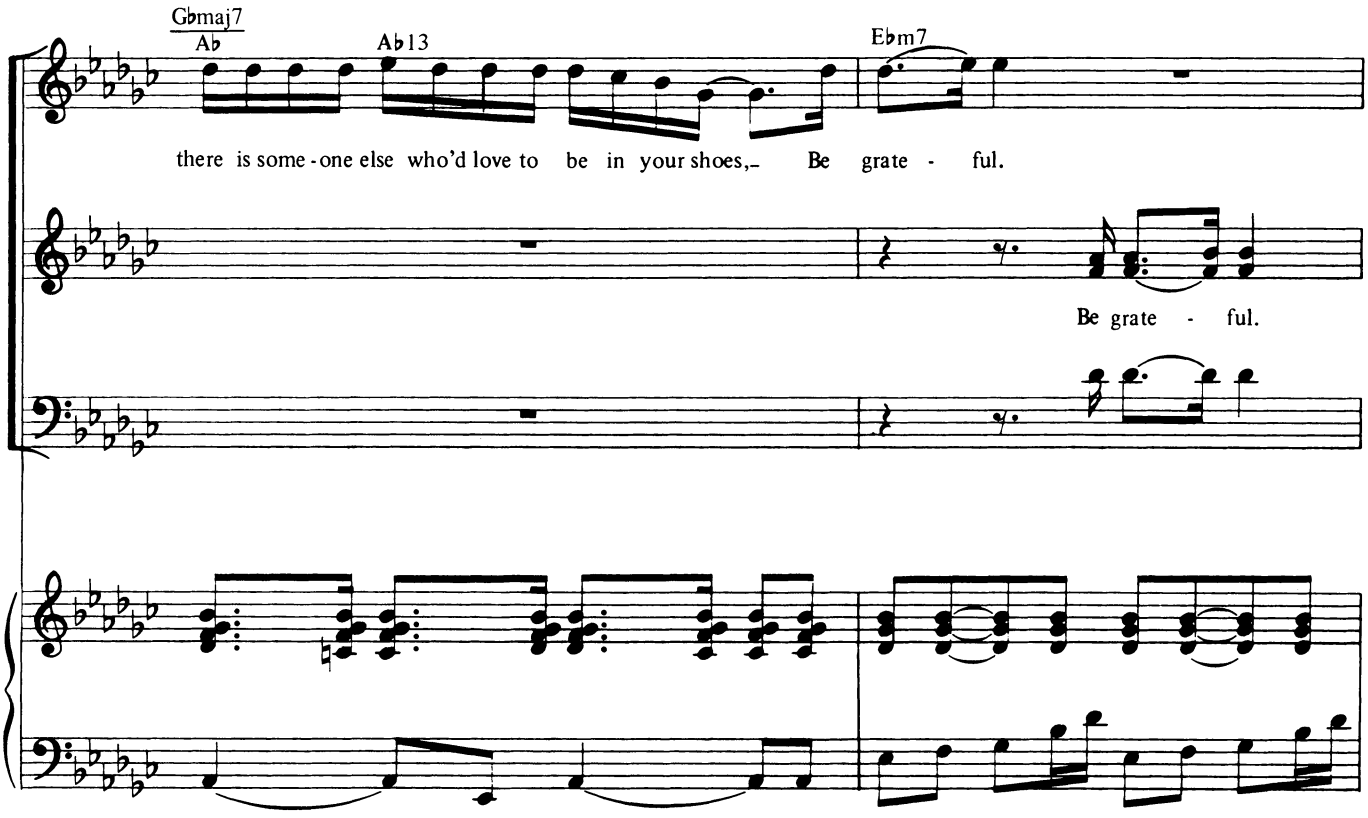

Figure 4. *Measures 32–36 of "Be Grateful." Words and music by Walter Hawkins.*

When technical, interpretive skills have become second nature, an improviser's personality will yield to the flow of the spiritual and emotional qualities that make blues and gospel live. He or she then will experience the freedom to express feelings and make varied improvised statements that transcend the mundane, the rehearsed, and the ordinary.

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Baker, David. *Advanced Improvisation.* Chicago: Maher Publications, 1976.

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George, Luvenia. *Teaching the Music of Six Different Cultures in the Modern Secondary School.* West Nyack, New York: Parker Publishing Company, Inc., 1976.

Southern, Eileen. *The Music of Black Americans: A History.* New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1971.

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Johnson, James P. *The Original James P. Johnson* (Folkways 2850)
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Vocal blues

The Blues. Jazz, vol. 2 (Folkways 2802)
Smith, Bessie. *Any Woman's Blues* (Columbia CG-30126; two discs)
The Story of the Blues (Columbia CG-30008; two discs)
Williams, Big Joe. *Hell-bound and Heaven-sent* (Folkways 31004E)

Traditional gospel

Cleveland, Rev. James. *Peace Be Still* (Savoy 14076)
Davis Sisters. *The Best of the Davis Sisters* (Savoy 7017; two discs)
Jackson, Mahalia. *Mahalia Jackson Recorded in Europe* (Columbia CS-8526)
Martin, Roberta, Singers. *Grace* (Savoy 14022)
Sanctified Singers. *The Sanctified Singers, Vol. 2* (Herwin 203)
Ward Singers. *Surely God Is Able* (Savoy 14001)

Contemporary gospel

Crouch, Andrae. *Take Me Back* (Light 5637)
Hawkins, Edwin, Singers. *O Happy Day* (Buddah BDS 5070)
_____. *Wonderful* (Birthright 4005)
Hawkins, Walter. *Love Alive II* (Light 5737)