Gospel Influences

Who would have thought that this same band—The Dominoes—would make bigger history in the long run with their incorporation of ***gospel*** styles? They did, largely because leader Billy Ward had the foresight to hire an 18-year-old gospel singer named **Clyde McPhatter**, one of the first real "stars" of rock & roll. McPhatter sang the high moans on "Sixty Minute Man" but came to the fore on subsequent releases, as on "**Have Mercy Baby**," a song commonly referred to as the birth of the "rhythm & gospel" mixture of gospel singing over rhythm & blues that put a new fire into vocal group styles and eventually led to soul music.

"Have Mercy Baby" is set to a straightforward 12-bar blues and is backed by a strong beat and a grinding, saxophone-led R&B band. The song is also sexy like its predecessor, though not overtly so this time—the sensuality is more in McPhatter's voice and pleading delivery, and *that* came straight from the church. McPhatter's singing seems loose and freely emotional and is set against a constant echo from the background singers that drives the song forward. That "**call-and-response**" was clearly a gospel device, used in group singing and in the interplay between a lead voice and a church choir, or between a preacher and the congregation. McPhatter's improvisatory singing style also illusrates his gospel background: he plays with the melody throughout the song, bending it to fit his heightening emotion until he finally breaks down into overwhelmed sobs at the end of the song. (McPhatter's shrieking sobs became his trademark: the sorrow of a man overwhelmed with the Spirit and the Grief. Usually reserved for the church, that overt emotion was taken to a melodramatic extreme for "The Bells," which is set as a girlfriend's "funeral," complete with an intoning preacher, a church organ, somber backing vocals and a shattered, weeping McPhatter.)

The specifics of McPhatter's style—the phrasing and "melismas," or single syllables stretched expressively over a number of notes—and the sheer level of his emotional involvement were also clearly gospel-derived to listeners within the black audience, as were the pleading lyrics themselves:

> Have mercy mercy baby, I know I done you wrong
> Have mercy mercy baby, I know I done you wrong
> Now my heart is full with sorrow, so take me back where I belong

I've been a good-for-nothin', I've lied and cheated too
I've been a good-for-nothin', I've lied and cheated too
But I reaped it all, my darlin', and I don't know what to do.

The song is a clear *aab* 12-bar blues but it reads like—and is—a plea for forgiveness: aimed at the Woman rather than the Lord, but sung with the same urgency. As writer Barry Hanson put it, "The title summarizes the whole rhythm & gospel idea: "Baby" is interchangeable with "Lord." In fact, the entire lyric could be transformed back into a gospel prayer with very little effort."[i] This same "blues + gospel" formula, with the "Lord" and the "Woman" as essentially interchangeable parts, was elaborated in the work of Ray Charles, James Brown and the others who completed R&B's transformation into soul.

"Have Mercy Baby" was #1 R&B hit in 1952, and its success alarmed many in the black community with its bold leap over the line between secular and sacred—the Devil and the Lord—that had always kept the blues and gospel apart, regardless of how closely related their musical languages were. Gospel music itself had once been the subject of much debate and disapproval as its growing popularity displaced the older spirituals, such as "Amazing Grace," that had been the vehicle for black religious expression. The term "gospel" was popularized in the twenties and thirties by songwriters who wrote new religious songs with popular influences and an emotional appeal that stretched beyond the church. **Thomas A. Dorsey** was the W. C. Handy of gospel: the author of "Precious Lord," "Peace in the Valley" and many other gospel standards and the founder of the first publishing house devoted to black gospel music. And like the early blues, many of the greatest gospel singers were strong-voiced women—Clara Ward, Mahalia Jackson, Marion Williams, Bessie Griffin, Sister Rosetta Tharpe—who sang their praises to the Lord with same passion that fueled Bessie Smith and the other "classic blues" singers, and the same passion that would mark the style of their most famous disciple, Aretha Franklin.

Vocal groups had been a prominent feature of black gospel music for many years as well, and were coming to the fore on the gospel circuit, as they were in the rhythm & blues world, in the late 1940's and early 1950's. Groups like the Five Blind Boys, Dixie Hummingbirds, Swan Silvertones and the Soul Stirrers were enormously popular and their effect on R&B groups was inevitable. While the influence of gospel was heard in earlier R&B singers (in Roy Brown's "crying" delivery of "Good Rockin' Tonight," for example, or in the eclectic style of Dinah Washington, who sang jazz, blues and pop with a style rooted in her early years as a gospel singer), the influence was felt most fully and significantly in the vocal groups. Of particular importance were the **Soul Stirrers** and their lead singer, R. H. Harris, who popularized the falsetto singing so common in soul music and pioneered an emotional and rhythmically fluid singing style set against a harsher second lead and repetitive, rhythmic "vamps" from the backing singers: exactly the type of embellished lead against a stable backing response that drives "Have Mercy Baby." (Harris would never have sung to the 12-bar blues that the Dominoes' harmonies outline so clearly, however. He could not even abide by the "worldly ways" of his fellow Soul Stirrers and left the group in 1951. He was replaced by a young Sam Cooke.)

The golden age of gospel music—1945-1960—paralleled the era of rhythm & blues and shared its network of independent records labels and mirrored its "chitlin circuit" in a network of concert halls and tabernacles devoted to gospel music. By the

end of the 1950's the assimilation of gospel—both the sorrowful laments and the shouts of celebration—into R&B was so complete that a new term, "soul," became necessary and the lines between the two were nearly dissolved. The inspiration of gospel music was felt most widely in the 1960's, when soul music and the civil rights struggle both came of age and the music and the black church served as rallying points for social change.

Clyde McPhatter & the Drifters

Billy Ward's vision of fusing gospel styles with R&B brought a wide new range of expression to vocal group singing and to all rhythm & blues. Meanwhile, however, Clyde McPhatter was starting to feel that it made little sense to be the lead singer and star of a group still billed as "Billy Ward & The Dominoes": those who didn't know better simply assumed that the great singer out front was Ward himself. He ran afoul of taskmaster Ward and was fired from—and gladly left—the group in 1953. (Billy Ward hired the unknown Jackie Wilson to take the McPhatter's place.) Ahmet Ertegun wasted no time in bringing McPhatter to Atlantic Records and assembling a group for him to front. The group was called "The Drifters," the longest-running act in the rock & roll era, though "their" career was marked by so many personnel changes that they eventually overpopulated the "oldies" circuit with a bewildering number of groups legitimately billing themselves The "Drifters." (The Drifters famous for later hits like "Up on the Roof" and "Under the Boardwalk" were a completely different set of singers; the earliest line-up of the group is usually referred to as "Clyde McPhatter & the Drifters.")

"**Money Honey**" was the first in a run of 43 hits for various Drifters line-ups. The "blow harmonies," or "bagpipe harmonies," that back Clyde McPhatter are the distinctive feature of the arrangement, though guitar great Mickey Baker, saxophonist Sam "The Man" Taylor and the rest of the great house band gave the record a typical Atlantic sheen. The loose feel of the group and, especially, of McPhatter's free-ranging lead vocals point again to the crucial influence of gospel styles, which were the catalyst for moving beyond a sound world bounded by the Ink Spots' mainstream ballads and the older jump-based uptempo group styles. (A comparison of the Drifters sleek modern sound and the Clover's more weighted R&B style illustrates the difference between the two feels.)

Written by arranger Jesse Stone, "Money Honey" is a clever song about the eternal quest for cash, given an appealingly deadpan delivery by McPhatter and highlighted by a singalong refrain that appealed to both pop and R&B fans. The Drifters' other big hit with Clyde McPhatter appealed as well, though for the wrong reasons in many minds. "**Honey Love**" was banned by many radio stations and banished from the juke boxes in many areas., though it still made it to #1 on the R&B charts and reached a good many thrilled white ears as well with its invocation of the non-stop, 'round the clock pleasures of "honey love."

Clyde McPhatter was drafted in 1954, in an unfortunate stroke of bad luck and bad timing. He returned to Atlantic in 1956 and continued as a solo act. He had several solo hits—his biggest was 1958's "A Lover's Question"—but was never able to fully regain the inspired and effortless sound of his Dominoes and Drifters recordings. His influence was felt most clearly in Smokey Robinson's high, graceful voice, but it really

was immeasurable. The "first soul singer" died of a heart attack in 1972, at the age of forty-one.

The "5" Royales

The Cincinnati-based **King Records** and its subsidiary Federal label rivaled Atlantic Records for great rhythm & blues, and had a broad roster of artists that represented all styles of R&B and even white country & western music. The label's first successful vocal group was The "5" Royales, led by songwriter and guitarist Lowman Pauling, had a first R&B hit in 1952 with "Baby, Don't Do It" while they were still with Apollo Records (they came to King in 1954). Always a star attraction on the R&B circuit, The "5" Royales never cracked the pop market, but they did write and record the original versions of several songs that were hits for an eclectic array of later artists, including "Dedicated to the One I Love," which was covered by the Shirelles and the Mamas & Papas, "Tell the Truth," which was covered by Ray Charles and Eric Clapton, and "**Think**," a prophetic look to the future of soul that was covered by King labelmate James Brown. ("Think" was a hit twice for Brown, in fact, in two different versions separated by the immense expanse of the 1960's. The "5" Royales' 1957 original and James Brown's 1960 and 1973 covers serve as a good and handy illustration of the progression from R&B to soul to funk.)

Hank Ballard & the Midnighters

Hank Ballard & the Midnighters—another in a long line of Johnny Otis discoveries—also recorded for King Records and dropped their original name, the Royals, to avoid confusion with The "5" Royales. Like many other young singers not suited well to ballads, Ballard was thrilled by the Dominoes and Drifters and inspired to create his own mix of raunchy lyrics sung with a gospel wail over a 12-bar blues and an R&B band backing punctuated by rhythmic "bagpipe harmonies." The result was 1954's "**Work With Me Annie**," the song that earned the Midnighters a spot right next to the Dominoes in the horrified hearts of parents. Lines like "Annie please don't cheat, give me all my meat" and the refrain of "Work with me Annie, let's get it while the gettin' is good!" were not likely to please Mom and Dad, but they certainly delighted teenagers, who passed the song around like a dirty joke so obvious that it was funnier without the punch line. And just in case there *was* any doubt about the real meaning of the song, the Midnighters followed with "Annie Had a Baby (Can't Work No More)," which contained a memorable explanation and moral to remember: "That's what happens when the gettin' gets good!"

The "Annie" saga reached the point of diminishing returns with "Annie's Aunt Fannie" and "Henry's Got Flat Feet (Can't Dance No More)," but not before inspiring an "answer" song from 16-year-old Etta James, co-authored and produced by (who else?) Johnny Otis. "Roll With Me Henry" featured the future author of "Louie Louie," Richard Berry, playing the role of "Hank" in a teasing, call-and-response invitation to more "work" that was renamed "The Wallflower" for popular consumption (and further sanitized as "Dance With Me Henry" by white singer Georgia Gibbs).

Hank Ballard & the Midnighters continued with "Sexy Ways," "It's Love Baby (24 Hours a Day)" and other songs of wonderfully questionable taste and indisputably

great dance beats, most featuring electric guitar leads that were a striking contrast to the sax-dominated sound of other group backings. Ballard had his biggest influence in a more roundabout way, however, when a note-for-note copy of a two-year-old Midnighters record started a national craze in 1960: Ballard wrote and recorded "The Twist" in 1958, then released it as merely the B-side of a ballad called "Teardrops on Your Letter." While Chubby Checker was forever associated with the song, the dance craze it triggered pulled Ballard's original up to #28 in the pop charts (mostly the result of kids who accidentally bought the "wrong" version) and inspired a few Twist-tempo follow-ups, including the 1960 pop hits "Finger Poppin' Time" and "Let's Go, Let's Go, Let's Go," which were good, catchy dance numbers but a long way from the great bump-and-grind of his "Annie" days.

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[i]Barry Hansen, "Rhythm & Gospel," in "The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll," ed. Anthony DeCurtis, rev. ed. (1976; rpt. New York: Random House, 1992), p. 18.