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**Richard Smallwood**

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Songwriter, pianist, singer, arranger Richard Smallwood has played a major role in developing an innovative gospel sound with vocal arrangements that integrate Euroclassical and jazz elements with traditional gospel styles.

Born in 1948 in Atlanta, Georgia, he showed an early aptitude for music by learning to play the piano by ear at a young age. Formal piano studies commenced by age seven and continued throughout his studies at Howard University in Washington, DC, graduating cum laude with dual degrees in vocal performance and piano. While in college, he participated in the first college-based gospel choir, whose formation came about largely as a reaction to being prohibited from playing gospel music in the university practice rooms. As this occurred in 1965 when racial tensions were high, the university's policy prodded Black students to push back, resulting in curricular changes that validated African musical traditions and the contributions of African American musicians.

### **Significant Contributions to Christianity in the United States**

In 1977 the Richard Smallwood Singers were formed, whose debut album topped Billboard's spiritual chart for eighteen months. That initial success propelled the Singers to create further recordings throughout the decades of the 1980s and 1990s, meeting with similar success. In 1980 he formed a larger choir called Vision, producing the album entitled *Adoration*.

"Total Praise," one of his most widely performed songs by church and collegiate choirs alike, can be heard on that album.

Smallwood's musical output has been prolific while its popular appeal is attested by numerous chart-topping recordings. His multiple nominations for Grammy and Stellar awards over several decades underscore the respect with which he is regarded by his musical peers. Other honors include receiving the Distinguished Achievement Award from his alma mater (Howard University) in 1997, being granted an honorary doctorate of sacred music from Richmond Virginia Seminary in 2006, and being inducted into the Gospel Music Hall of Fame also in 2006.

In an article entitled "Gospel and Blues Improvisation" (1980) Smallwood draws comparisons between blues and gospel styles. Acknowledging that elements of both genres mutually infiltrate each other, he affirms their distinct identities as well. Yet one shared characteristic is their improvisational quality embedded in both musical forms. He writes,

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. (Smallwood, 1980, 102)

Creative expressions of individuality finely honed through diligent practice and preparation coupled with a readiness to

### **SMALLWOOD, RICHARD**

From its earliest roots in African American spirituals and traditional black worship styles to a cappella Gospel quartets to the development of choral renditions of classic spirituals, contemporary Gospel music has continued to evolve.

venture into unexpected, improvised spaces as the spirit moves—it sounds surprisingly autobiographical.

### References and Resources

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—JEANNINE MICHELE GRAHAM