Higher Ground: Voices of Contemporary Gospel Music.

Reviewed by Birgitta Johnson

Higher Ground: Voices of Contemporary Gospel Music is an impressive collection of interviews of today's most recognized contemporary gospel music artists. Interviews with current chart-toppers such as Donnie McClurkin, Yolanda Adams, and Kirk Franklin as well as pioneers of contemporary gospel Edwin Hawkins, Andrae Crouch, Karen Clark-Sheard and Dorinda Clark-Cole of the Clark Sisters are only part of the wide spectrum of artists presented in *Higher Ground.* Youth-centric artists such as Tonéx, Mary Mary, T-Bone, and Gospel Gangstaz are also featured extensively. Totally comprised of interview footage collected in various cities around the United States, the documentary does not include any narration and only presents the personal accounts and testimonies of notable artists, producers, gospel radio personalities, ministers, record executives, and gospel hip-hop advocates. The directors of *Higher Ground,* Marci Kenon and Damon Stout, come from segments of the urban music, gospel music, and film industries and were able to bring together over fifty gospel music insiders to participate in the making of this documentary.

The DVD edition of *Higher Ground* is divided into nineteen chapters and begins in the first chapter by exploring the power of music in culture as well as the stigma attached to much of Black music produced today. In briefly discussing the negative images and messages prevalent in Black secular music over the last few decades and the impact it is having on the young people of society, several gospel artists suggest that there must be an alternative and that gospel music is the alternative. By distinguishing what gospel music has become in the twenty-first century, artists featured in *Higher Ground* implicitly provide several characteristics of what contemporary gospel music is in general. In addition to contemporary gospel giants Franklin, McClurkin and Adams, the opinions of gospel music icons Albertina Walker and Dr. Bobby Jones are also included.

While *Higher Ground*'s overall theme is to show the growth of the contemporary gospel style and the gospel music industry since the release of Edwin Hawkins's "Oh, Happy Day" in 1968, it equally exposes the obstacles and opposition contemporary gospel artists have had to face from church communities as well as gospel music traditionalists. This documentary places Hawkins' pioneering success in the context of a continuum in which gospel music and its ambassadors have always faced challenges from the Christian community when deviating too far from what is considered "traditional" at the time. The documentary not only covers over thirty years of contemporary gospel music, it includes references to gospel music founders and cross-over pioneers such as Thomas Dorsey and Mahalia Jackson, who were often thrown out of churches for adding blues elements to hymns.

After exploring gospel music's controversial beginnings in the second and third chapters, *Higher Ground* devotes five chapter segments to several historical guideposts of contemporary gospel music. After the secular cross-over success of Edwin Hawkin's "Oh Happy Day" in 1968 is recounted, the emergence of the Clark Sisters a decade later and their history making song, "You Brought the Sunshine" is discussed by Karen Clark-Sheard and Dorinda Clark-Cole as well as artists who were influenced by the 'Clark Sisters Sound' such as Fred Hammond, Tonéx and Mary Mary. Other pivotal moments in contemporary gospel include the discovery of the Winans by Andrae Crouch and the widespread success of their music in dance clubs and on secular radio in the 1980s and 1990s. In both accounts of the Clark's and Winans's successes in secular realms, the backlash from their respective church communities and denominational organizations were candidly discussed.

The biggest moment in recent contemporary gospel history was the release of the remix to the song "Stomp" by gospel's first platinum selling artist, Kirk Franklin. Representing one of the biggest successes as well as the biggest controversies in gospel music, the story behind "Stomp" is told by a variety of gospel music industry heavy weights including record executive of GospoCentric Vicki Mack-Lataillade, magazine publisher Teresa Hairston, producer Percy Bady and a host of other artists. Edwin Hawkins also makes very interesting parallels between himself and Franklin that gospel enthusiast would find helpful in drawing connections across generations within the gospel music world. Then the documentary goes back to point out another controversial moment in contemporary gospel that often is over looked: the release of Tramaine Hawkins's album *Fall Down* in 1985. The popularity of *Fall Down* in dance clubs and Hawkins's attire on the album cover was met with a level of controversy that was only surpassed by the release of "Stomp" over ten years later in 1997.

Chapters ten through twelve highlight breakthroughs and the increase in opportunities for gospel music artists since the late 1990s. The story behind the creation and success of "Shackles" by sister duo Mary Mary, for example, is

recounted by the group and their producer Warryn Campbell in chapter eleven. The historic Hopeville Tour is another gospel music milestone discussed in chapter twelve. Featuring platinum selling artists, Donnie McClurkin, Yolanda Adams, and Kirk Franklin; the financial success of the tour opened doors for other successful gospel music tours.

Chapters thirteen “Testimonies of Power” and fourteen “The Ministry” address the spiritual impact of gospel music reaching secular audiences. These segments get at the heart of gospel music’s powerful message and purpose as an evangelistic tool. From gospel icons such as Albertina Walker, Dr. Bobby Jones, and Andrae Crouch to today’s contemporary stars such as Vickie Winans, Richard Smallwood, and Karen Clark-Sheard, all repeatedly point to the message and lyrics of gospel music far more important than any catchy sound or beat. These chapters also include personal accounts from artists about the life changing power of gospel music and stories of healing shared by their fans and reinforce for viewers why these artists have chosen the gospel music lifestyle over that of more secular routes in music.

As thorough as the previous chapters are, the next two chapters on “Contemporary Hip-hop Music” and “Holy Hip-hop” are the most informative to viewers because there are not many sources available that provide information on the beginnings of gospel rap and holy hip-hop. *Higher Ground* features some of the pioneers of holy hip-hop such as T-Bone and Camp 8 (formerly Gospel Gangstaz), and Christsyde. Female lyricist, Elle R.O.C. gives a brief history of holy hip-hop’s beginnings in the mid-1980s as well as other pioneering artists and groups that paved the way for today’s emcees. This chapter also includes self-critiques on the part of veterans of holy hip-hop that stress their evangelistic responsibilities as well as the demand for lyrical dexterity and “flow” within holy hip-hop performance. Using the biblical model of David “playing skillfully,” they also comment on the danger of holy hip-hop emcees not properly studying scripture and over-relying on talent.

In chapter seventeen entitled “Ideal Future” artists interviewed offer hopes for the future of gospel music and the growth of the gospel music industry. Gospel industry insiders and artists alike point to how there is no magic formula or budget for producing cross-over gospel music hits. The challenge of the spread and growth of gospel music versus the gospel music industry becoming too commercial is also addressed.

In keeping with the tradition of the church and the lifestyle of professional gospel artists, the final chapter is a series of invitations by many of the interview subjects directed at the viewer to submit their lives to God through Jesus Christ. This aspect of the documentary really revealed the ministerial and evangelistic roles of gospel artists. Beyond being talented singers and musicians, viewers really get to view why they carry the torch of gospel music through the contemporary era. Finally, the DVD’s special features are a worthwhile bonus. They include the documentary’s trailers, extended interviews, outtakes, a photo gallery, and three bonus song tracks by gospel hip-hop artists The Ambassador (from The Crossmovement), Lavoisier the MC, and J-Silas. These three songs come from a companion CD for the documentary entitled *Higher Ground: Hip-hop Reformed and Reborn.* The only aspect not present in the documentary is footage showing the gospel musicians performing the songs that made them popular. Although their music is played in the background during interviews, the documentary does not share the wealth of performance footage found in the influential gospel music documentary *Say Amen, Somebody* (1982). *Higher Ground* also assumes that its viewers have a basic knowledge of Black gospel music history and aesthetic characteristics. Thus, more time is spent referencing influential people and events in contemporary gospel and issues facing gospel music in general. Regardless of the lack of performance footage and musicological analysis, the plethora of primary sources provided in this documentary would definitely make it an asset to any ethnomusicology, African American music, African American studies, music industry, sacred music, and/or religious studies course.

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