



Thomas A. Dorsey's best known hits frame his head. "Sally Martin was the first to sing one of my songs, and John Charles Thomas was the first famous singer to do one when he sang *Peace In The Valley* in the mid-1940's," Dorsey recalls. *Valley* was first gospel song on Hit Parade. "I'm not trying for hits now. I'm out to make standards," he says.

KING OF THE GOSPEL WRITERS

Thomas A. Dorsey gave up blues to write world's best known gospel songs

ONCE ALL that music meant to Thomas A. Dorsey as he went from tavern to tavern playing the piano or a guitar was "50¢ a night, all the liquor you could drink and a good-looking woman to fan you." That was in his youth when he was famous as "Georgia Tom," a jazz, blues and bawdy song writer-performer.

The Dorsey of today is another man—one who gained religious conviction in the 1920's, then had it shaken to the core after the death in one week of his wife and newborn son in 1932. He had begun to write gospel songs, bouncy melodies with a religious theme, in 1921 following a long illness, and after the double tragedy, his fight for faith led him to write possibly his greatest—*Take My Hand, Precious Lord*. It is also his favorite: "It's nearer to me." *Precious Lord* has been a hit record as performed by Tennessee Ernie Ford and Eddie Arnold. This summer it was also recorded by Roy Rogers and Dale Evans.

Dorsey has written several songs especially for famed gospel singer Mahalia Jackson: *Life Can Be Beautiful*, *Hold Me* and *There'll Be Peace In The Valley*. Country singer Red Foley's recording of *Peace In The Valley* sold over a million copies (a composer usually gets two cents royalty on each record, sometimes more). Bandleader Guy Lombardo and his tenor brother, Carmen, made *My Desire* famous. Morton

Downey scored with Dorsey's *When I've Done My Best*. Miss Jackson declares: "Mr. Dorsey is something like Duke Ellington. His songs stay in style. I always say he's the Irving Berlin of the religious field."

The 63-year-old composer has written over 400 gospel songs since 1921. Asked which comes first, the music or the words, he replies: "Both come at the same time. That's what's strange about it. It's done from an inspiration—I say, a divine inspiration. I used to write fast when I was in show business, too, but it was for money then. A fellow would come up to me and say, 'Here's \$5, write me a song,' and I'd do it, I can write a song in 30 minutes, jot down the melody, type up the words, putting the harmony in later."

He may get an idea "on the train, walking along, in the car, fishing in the river, or sitting on the lakeside." He laughs when asked if he invariably had pencil and paper handy. "I always find something. I even wrote a title on a cigarette paper once."

Over the years, many people, white and Negro have tried to steal his songs. The businessman in Dorsey shows when he laughs: "We're always in litigation. If they steal something and it looks like it will be a hit, and there's some money in it, we step in. If the song doesn't go, we don't bother."



Directing choir, Dorsey stars on "Festival," weekly Chicago fine and popular arts show on WTTW-TV which devoted a program to him. A TV vet, he will compose music for ABC-TV program on noted author Nelson Algren.



A real sport during transitional period from blues to gospel, Tom Dorsey appears as he was in 1921. He also composed music for TV series, *Ordeal By Fire*, 17 filmed programs on Civil War.

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EDITS NEW MAGAZINE



Palmer Institute of Authorship student, Maurice F. White, was recently appointed Executive Editor of the new monthly magazine, "Topic" which is published in Minneapolis... Another example of Palmer graduates "success in writing."

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National president of Gospel Choirs and Choruses, Dorsey presents scholarship winners at national convention in St. Louis. Prestonia Davis (r.), Philadelphia, won \$250 first prize. Patricia Wilburn (l.), Chicago, earned \$150 second prize.

DORSEY SAYS NO 'SOUL' IN JAZZ

AN EXPERT on blues, jazz or gospel music, Thomas Dorsey scoffs at the idea of "soul" in jazz or blues. "These jazz fellows come along and talk about 'soul music.' They're late. 'Heart music' is what they should call it. You get 'heart-felt' music out of jazz but God isn't bothered about jazz. 'Soul' music is gospel singing. Everybody's trying to get soul now but soul music came out of gospel music."

He doesn't play jazz or blues any more. "I believe in keeping the church in gospel songs. To make them popular, they've jazzed them up; I say, 'junked them up' so you can't tell some gospel songs from rock and roll. But I haven't changed any beats, any syncopation, any melody in my songs, and I don't favor the way some of the gospel songs are done."

Gospel music, says Thomas Dorsey quoting Billboard magazine, is now a \$2 million business and Dorsey is getting his share of it. But he recalls vividly, "When I first started writing gospel songs, no one would sing them."

"In 1926," he says "I bought 500 plain envelopes, 500 two-cent stamps and circularized the churches with my songs printed on loose leaf paper. It was two years before I got one reply, then it was a letter thanking me for my song and asking me for another. I never did see any money." But, he continues proudly: "I'm the one who made the business. I made a market. I even coined the name 'gospel song.'"

He gave up lucrative sales of blues to write gospel music. In his jazz days, Dorsey wrote more than 200 blues including *Stormy Sea Blues*, *Last Minute Blues* and the music for *It's Tight Like That*. His first royalty check for *It's Tight Like That* was \$2,400 but refusing the lure of easy money, he stuck with the harder, rockier road of gospel songs.

If a performer sings his songs in a night club or jazzes it, Dorsey doesn't like it. "But as long as they pay my performance rights, or my royalties, I have to accept it."



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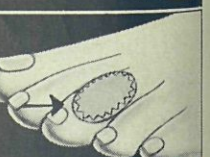
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Flag studded with crisp \$1 bills honors Dorsey during convention testimonial program of organization he founded 30 years ago and has led ever since. He once worked at steel mills to earn money to attend Chicago Musical College three years.



Will Walker's Syncopators included Dorsey when they appeared in Chicago in 1921. Band members were (l. to r.) Wallace Bishop, Dorsey, Louis Taylor, Fred Pollack, Les Heite, George Orendorph, Detroit Shannon, William Frazier, pianist Walker.



Leading own band in 1922, Dorsey arranged songs, played for famous blues singer, the late Ma Rainey. Group included (l. to r.) Gabriel Washington, Albert Wynn, David Nelson, Ma Rainey, F. Pollack, Dorsey.

Ernie Ford and gospel singer Clara Ward have often sung Dorsey songs. EBONY editor Era Bell Thompson, on world tour, heard record blaring in Mallorca street. It was Ford singing Dorsey's *Precious Lord*.



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Thomas A. Dorsey and wife live in comfortable home on South Side in Chicago. Second wife Kathryn is mother of their two children: Thomas Madison Dorsey, 21, a student at Western Michigan Univ.; and Doris M. Dorsey, a food chain secretary.

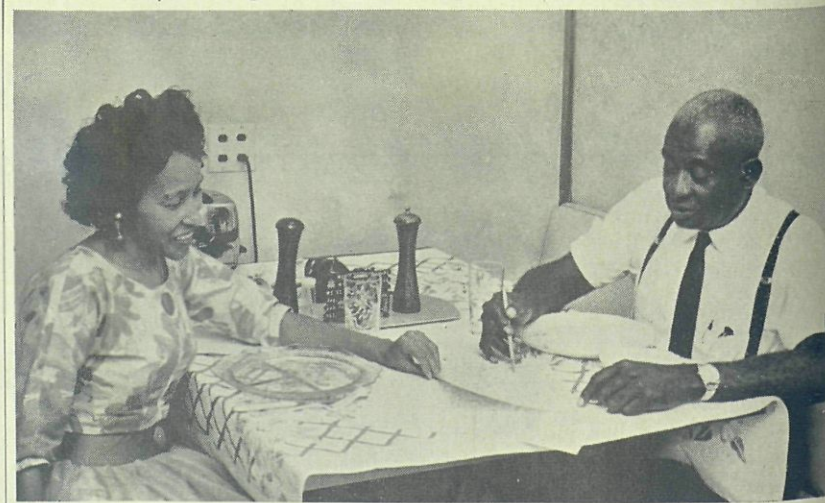
NOTED GOSPEL SONG COMPOSER SAYS HIS SONGS ARE FOR ALL

HE COULD have made more money as a white composer, Dorsey acknowledges when asked. "They have greater access to the outlets—television, radio, record companies. But I don't bother talking about money. I made it and I spent it fast. Maybe I could have made more had I been white but most of all, I write songs for people, not just colored people."

He doesn't think Negro singers sing his songs any better than white singers. "I have some white singers like the Blackwood Brothers who give it more feeling." Well-trained in arranging, conducting, harmony, theory and counter point, he deplores the current lack of training. "The trouble with many great artists, white and colored, they don't really know music. They can't read a note. It's always easier if you can learn the music, then make embellishments."

He supports integration wholeheartedly. "I'm for the whole program; sit-ins and freedom rides. My organization, the National Assn. of Gospel Choirs and Choruses, had the Rev. Fred L. Shuttlesworth speak at our convention this summer. We gave him \$500 for the cause. I'm a member of the Christian protest movement of Montgomery. Until everyone is free, no one is free. You know, musicians were the first to integrate in America! Over 30 years ago, we musicians played together and slept together. Musicians, bands and singers, are accepted where no one else is."

Some of his songs—*Let Us Work Together, Let Us Sing Together*—express his views on race. All of his music could be instructive to bigots, however, as it is joyous, vigorous, rich in love. Thomas Dorsey puts into practice the title of one of his favorite songs—*I'm Going To Live The Life I Sing About*.



Testing song, Dorsey sings melody for wife. When late bandleader Tommy Dorsey appeared in Chicago, Thomas received \$34,000 Decca Records check meant for Tommy, who got Thomas's \$94.70. "We exchanged checks," laments composer.

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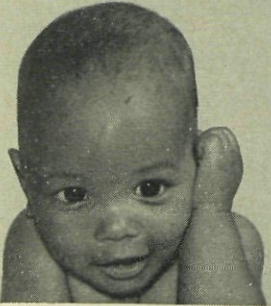
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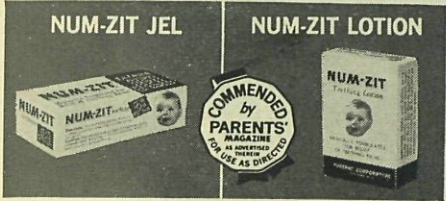
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Old pro Dorsey still plays smooth, rhythmic piano (this one at home owned by gospel organization). On applauding gospel songs he says: "I love applause. They're not so sacred they shouldn't be applauded, except maybe at a church service."



Daughter Doris waters Dad's garden (below) while parents watch. Dorsey is active gardener, proud of flowers. A Georgia minister's son, Dorsey wrote gospel music that languished until 1929 when he began to get orders for *If You See My Savior*.

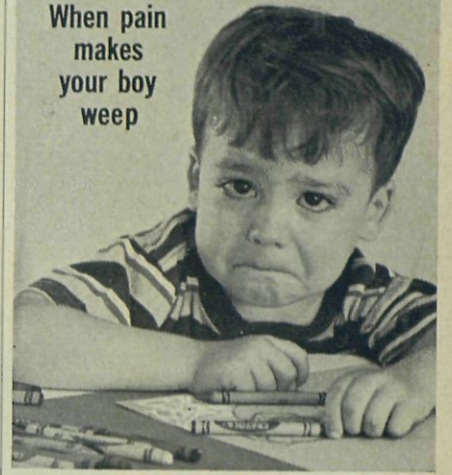


Composer shows family trick pool shot in basement of their home. Popularizing his songs was not easy: "Once a pastor agreed to let me sing, and I sat in a pew waiting. He dismissed the people and I was still sitting," he recalls.

Fishing, like gardening, is great Dorsey pastime. He owns summer cottage in Michigan, wades in lake as he now finds that rowing has become too strenuous at his age.



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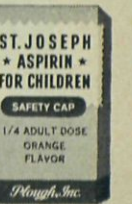
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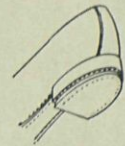
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