

## Church Girls: Revivals, Music, and Sanctified Girlhood in the Early-20th Century

Ambre Dromgoole

PhD Candidate, Yale University

Among many things, my fellowship with the Center for Lived Religion in the Digital Age has allowed me the opportunity to experiment with different genres of writing in order to illustrate the sites and scenes of varying historical events and performances at the heart of my research. What follows is a speculative narrative describing the scene of a little-discussed musical group called the Jubilee Harmonizers, which consisted of 5 young girl Sanctified musicians in the early-20th century. Very little has been written about them, but their tours saved the Church of God in Christ's Saints Industrial School, the educational arm of the largest Black Pentecostal denomination in the United States, from financial ruin during the Great Depression.

The story of the Harmonizers and the Saints Industrial School is one of many specific examples of the Sanctified youth culture surrounding young girl musicians in the early decades of the 20th century.

Students with traditional musical training might have stayed in a conservatory for long hours of practicing. The learning here occurred through experience: touring with a tutor; serving as representatives of the COGIC denomination in order to dig one of its programs out of debt; and visiting cities in Florida where the Harmonizers had access to commercial amusements typically frowned upon in holiness doctrine. While on tour the Harmonizers continued daily prayer and School lessons, and they stayed with the church mothers who provided lodging during their travels. As such, their Sanctified education was not interrupted as much as it was elaborated by their exposure.



*The below snippet is taken from part of a larger project on Black girl Sanctified musicians in the early-20th century, which chronicles three sites and fields of learning (sanctified youth culture, sonic culture, and spacial culture) they encountered growing up in proximity to Black Holiness-Pentecostal traditions. Enjoy!*

For the Jubilee Harmonizers, entering a palatial Miami hotel complete with beautiful stone-tiled floors, marble columns, and large plants of different types waving limply at passerby was a world's difference from Mississippi's muddy bogs that terrorize car wheels and bus drivers dirtying themselves in the process of getting unstuck. And yes, Mother Riley's house was pretty in its own unique way and smelled of warm, butter-filled corn bread, and one could expect to hear the sloshing of turnip greens against the walls of an old, deep, pot each Sunday accompany hymns, prayers, or some combination of both. That was heaven. But this? This was opulence. Cool breezes ruffle the leaves on palm trees and vivacious colors surround antique furniture whispering "come hither" in tones Sanctified teachings warn of. Engulfed in the splendor of their surroundings, the group of girls don't notice the glances they garner from patrons gliding through the lobby, patrons who think "these Negro girls must be lost," because skin this dark doesn't usually have marble counter-topped backdrops and feet clickety-clacking across custom terracotta floors - never mind their servants, cooks, bellhops, and janitors who keep steady paces, engaging their every whim; they rarely pay them any attention. A practiced unseeing.

Sighting an enclosed vestibule near the concierge counter with high arches capable of carrying voices throughout the building, Sister Mallery whispers "stand here" to the girls, quickly arranges them in two rows, and says a brief prayer that millionaire tourists will find their sounds ethereal, not disruptive. That their harmonies will engulf the hearts of the wealthy, persuading them to share their riches in order to save the financially strained Saints Industrial School. As tourists continue to shuffle in and out of the vestibule, the girls lift their heads from prayer and focus on the coming selection. Nerves flutter through their bellies- they were used to impromptu performances by this point, but not amongst unknowing white people. They'd performed in their share of large white churches, and of course Black ones of varying size and type on this tour, but not in a place like this. Amongst people like this. But this, in fact, was their last hope.

"I need thee, o, I need thee" begins Lillien, establishing the B-flat key signature for her fellow group mates. Her warm-textured alto voice floats through the lobby, halting passerby, calling attention to the previously invisible Negro girls inhabiting the space, "every hour, I need thee. Bless me now, my savior. I come to thee" she finishes, opening eyes previously shut to stamp out insecurities and home in on the gentle presence of the Holy Spirit she'd been taught to identify and recognize before singing; she realizes that they no longer stand alone, cordoned off to the side, but are now surrounded by a sea of people awaiting their song's continuation. As Lillien repeats the chorus "I need thee, o, I need thee," Ruth and Mamie join in a third above and below her respectively on "every hour I need thee" filling out the sound, filling up the space as they'd been trained, "bless me now, my savior. I come to thee." By the end of their selection, unsuspecting audience members in all manners of dress applaud, some even cry, enraptured by their beautiful voices. Before Sister Mallery even finishes making the request for funds needed to

support the girls' school, tourists overwhelm them with offers to send shoes, clothes, money, and food. It seems following God, even if outside of the church, yields blessings.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> While this is a speculative account, the Jubilee Harmonizers' were a real group of girl students at the Church of God in Christ's Saints Industrial School that toured Florida singing in order to raise funds for their debt ridden school in the mid-1930's. All of the characters are real. I use this article from the COGIC periodical *The Whole Truth* as inspiration: "The Whole Truth [Newspaper], Vol. ?, No. ? (1936? ???) [Partial] :: Pentecostal and Charismatic Research Archive, accessed November 24, 2020, <http://digitalibrary.usc.edu/cdm/ref/collection/p15799coll14/id/253127>.