

Chorale prevails after founder's death

The Whitfield Co.'s new CD recently takes top spot on gospel chart

By Rhonda Bates-Rudd
The Detroit News

After the 1992 death of three-time Grammy Award-nominated gospel musician and director Thomas Whitfield, record company executives whispered rumors that —the 40-member chorale he founded in 1977 would probably not survive without him. Well, the rumors have been put to rest. The Whitfield Co.'s new CD — *Still... the Whitfield Co.* — has hit the airwaves and record store shelves. Recently, it landed the No. 1 position on SoundScan's Top Gospel Album chart. It was recorded at Detroit-based Crystal Rose Records.

The new single —*It's Above My Head* — recently ranked No. 35 on the SoundScan Gospel Music Singles' chart. Whitfield, who was 38 when he died of a heart attack, drew the road map for gospel chorale execution and presentation. His style has influenced today's ministers of music everywhere and gospel recording artists such as Fred Hammond, Donald Lawrence and the Tri-City Singers, as well as Kirk Franklin and his gospel-choir entourage. They've all paid homage to him in their CD liner notes.

"The record companies were afraid we didn't have the integrity, inferring that we would never record again — at least not without Thomas," said 21-year member and ^ president Donna Harris.

- "We knew the proof **would only** in the pudding."

Although Harris insisted that Whitfield inspired them to carry his legacy forward, she admitted reuniting has not been easy.

Shortly after Whitfield's death, members



Chorale members quelled rumors they would disband after the death of Thomas Whitfield, at piano.



"Still" recently hit No.1 in Soundscan Top Gospel Album chart's "new" category.

dropped out, etching the choir down to 30 members. They were challenged and often

hard-pressed to find a producer who, during interviews, would not express discomfort in trying to fill Whitfield's shoes.

They equally endured trials of nearly signing contracts to record a project, only to have the contract figuratively snatched from their hands before they could sign on the dotted line.

Eventually, they met composer James Brown, director of music for the 20,000 member New Birth Baptist Church in California.

"I was honored by their request to join them," said Brown, who briefly worked with Whitfield.

The choir hung in there, and today they are performing and touring across country and abroad. Members have performed with numerous entertainers such as Patti Labelle, Dionne Warwick, Stephanie Mills and Tramaine Hawkins. They are set to perform Music In The Park later this month with jazz flutist Alexander Zonjic.

Brian Spears, president of Crystal Rose Records, said there was never any doubt in his mind that the choir would carry on without their leader. "I had been with him for 12 years, and I knew the sound and the training he had instilled in them," Spears said.

"I knew it would take a leader who knew Thomas intimately that could pick up where he left off and bring some newness to their sound.

"When I heard the demo-tapes with Brown, I knew he could handle it."