



HUGH GRANNUM/Detroit Free Press

From left, Sandy Hudson, Beverly Alien, Pat Hatch and Phyllis Lyons sing in a Whitfield Company performance in Shain Park.

Gospel choir inspired by memory of late leader

BY CASSANDRA SPRATLING
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As soft summer breezes waft through the evening air, a community choir of 30 voices takes to the stage. The casually clad audience sits on lawn chairs or stretches out on blankets below the warm blue skies above Shain Park in downtown Birmingham.

This is not your typical setting for a gospel choir.

But then again, the Whitfield Company is not your typical gospel choir.

Its members came from some of the best church choirs around Detroit to audition for a position in the choir, which was founded by the late Thomas Whitfield, an innovator in gospel music and one of the primary reasons Detroit's star shines brightly on the nation's map of great gospel talent.

Six years after Whitfield's death, the company has released its first recording without him, "Still... The Whitfield Company".

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The Whitfield Company

5 p.m.
Saturday
Elizabeth Park
off Jefferson
east of I-75,
South of West
Road, Trenton
Free

*Jazz or the River
series runs 2 p.m.
to dark Saturday
and Sunday*

The Whitfield Company flourishes, inspired by memory of its late leader

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Such an appropriate title.

Even while introducing itself to new audiences at venues such as Shain Park last week and Trenton's Elizabeth Park this weekend, the choir wants its longtime followers to know that despite Whitfield's passing, it still is growing under his tremendous musical influence.

It still is the choir that secular artists such as Aretha Franklin, Patti LaBelle, Stephanie Mills and even Earth, Wind and Fire have turned to when they need a local choir to back them up. Jazz flutist Alexander Zonjic also has become a major supporter.

The choir still is singing and producing music written by Whitfield, who in the gospel community still is reverently referred to as "the Maestro." His works have been performed by such gospel stars as Shirley Caesar, Yolanda Adams and Vanessa Bell Armstrong.

And the choir still is upholding his standards of excellence for contemporary songs, majestic anthems and soul-stirring traditional music.

"If I had to think of one word to describe Thomas' music, it would be 'passionate,'" says Donna Harris, the group's president. "He does something with the music and the lyrics that allows you to be touched and to feel the story told in that song."

The charge of taking over the choir fell to Harris after Whitfield's sudden death from a heart attack in 1992. At the time she was vice-president of the choir and was one of its original members when Whitfield formed the chorale in 1977.

The choir's determination to continue after his death stemmed from the fact that it wasn't just a singing group, Harris explains.

Whitfield had nurtured a family of musicians and singers and infused them with the same desire he had to bring peace and inspiration to people through music.

"We realized after he died that what we had was more than a community choir," Harris says. "We were a family. Many of us started with him when we were teenagers and have been blessed to grow together. He wanted his talent to glorify God. I felt,

JAZZ ON THE RIVER SCHEDULE

Saturday and Sunday

1 p.m.: Gates open

Saturday

2 p.m.: Dan Lewis & Friends

3:30: Gordon Camp

5: Whitfield Company

6:30: Randy Scott

8: Tim Weisberg

Sunday

2 p.m.: Charles and Gwen Scales

3:30: Kimmie Home

5: Wendell Harrison & Mama's

Lickin' Stick Clarinet Ensemble

6:30: Evan Marks with special

guest Patsy Meyer

8: Alexander Zoniic & Friends

We all felt, inspired of God to try our best to see that his music lives."

It was no easy task because Whitfield wasn't there to push them. Plus, choir members didn't want to simply rest on his reputation. They wanted to grow from it.

Two things he stressed guided them, Harris says.

"He drilled in our heads: Always excel in music and always give God your best."

The choir thinks it's headed that lesson in its new recording — the group's ninth — and the music it takes to various venues around the country.

Harris says their faith consoled members and prodded them to go on.

"We believe that no matter what happens in life, there's a God who is able to deliver you, to restore you and give you peace," Harris says.

That message comes through in the choir's music, whether it's sung at outdoor concerts in the park, churches around the nation or backing up artists best known for their R&B music.

Harris says the choir has no qualms about taking religious music outside of church walls or singing with pop artists.

"It goes back to our motto: A message for the world — Jesus saves," Harris says. "I believe God is for everybody. People limit God, but God doesn't limit himself."

Zonjic met the group through a mutual friend a few years ago and has recommended it to various promoters who may not normally think gospel when they're putting together their musical lineup. "I find them so inspiring and their energy level is so high," says Zonjic, who's also "morning host on Smooth Jazz (WVMV-98.7 FM), one of the major sponsors for the Jazz on the River concert series in Trenton where the Whitfield Company sings this weekend. "I'm not a real knowledgeable person in

that religious music world. But I know they sing amazing arrangements, and they're all wonderful folks."

At Birmingham's Shain Park last week it was evident from the applause that the audience also was inspired by the performance.

Stella Burford and two of her friends had come from Pontiac for the concert. They're all members of Pontiac's Trinity

Missionary Baptist Church, where they sing in a choir. Their choir, like many church choirs, sings songs written or arranged by Whitfield, including "Precious Jesus," "Hallelujah Anyhow," "I'm Encouraged," "Let Everything Praise Him," are also popular with choirs nationwide.

Burford says she listens to one of the Whitfield Company's recordings at least twice a week. "I really like them. They're uplifting

Even those who'd never heard of the group enjoyed the Birmingham concert.

"No matter what your background is, no matter what your religious background is you can enjoy this because it's great music, and I love music," says Pat Sullivan of Bloom-field Hills.

As 12-year-old Kaley Panosian of Birmingham bounced to the beat, she offered another reason to enjoy the Whitfield Company.

"It's very jazzy," she says. "It's kind of like '90s music, even though it's gospel."