

(((MAHALIA JACKSON)))



TOP THE GOSPEL MOUNTAIN, Mahalia

Jackson's stature is such that her neighboring titans (Thomas A. Dorsey excepted) are diminished by comparison. Inspired by Bessie Smith's haunted, brooding testifying, Jackson developed a muscular style that coupled the blues sensibility of a woman forever 'buked and scorned to a deeply held faith in a higher power she knew in her own fashion. Indeed, being stubborn, contentious and not altogether a model of propriety herself, the God-fearing Jackson had good cause for coming on as an emotional firestorm, since this approach reflect-

ed her inner turmoil as she sought to stay the sacred course in an increasingly profane world. When she sang, it all came together: Hers was the blues singer's voice inveighing against profligacy; the folksinger's voice broadcasting the unceasing trials of the disenfranchised; the gospel singer's voice heralding the unconditional love, mercy and forgiveness God promised in the Good Book. Though some important trailblazers preceded her, it was Jackson who most profoundly melded the complex emotional hues of deep blues to gospel music. Not content to stop there, she then relayed the good news as she had shaped it to the ears and hearts of a secular multiracial audience, reaching numbers unprecedented in her day, or ours. As she is honored by the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum tonight, her achievement remains as imposing as the void left by her death on January 27, 1972.

Born in New Orleans on October 26, 1911, Jackson grew up singing in church. Although she was surrounded and fascinated by jazz and blues (Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey on the phonograph; Louis Armstrong and King Oliver sitting in at neighborhood lawn parties), she found in gospel's texts a source of strength she leaned on and learned from in enduring the suffocating, unrelenting racism directed at Southern blacks. (Her eye fixed on the goal beyond, she disdained the blues; she once said, "because when you finished, you still had the blues.") Working numerous odd jobs to help support her family, she finally migrated north to Chicago in 1927, anticipating better opportunities in a more tolerant climate. While working as a maid, she joined the choir at the Greater Salem Baptist Church, quickly was elevated to a soloist's spot and then moved over to join a quartet, the Johnson Singers. As her reputation spread through the Windy City's church community, she met Dorsey (who was then engaged in laying the foundation of modern gospel with his original hymns) and joined him in a duo playing at church meetings. In 1937, the same year she began working with Dorsey, she recorded a few sides for Decca that received little notice. Nine years and many appearances with Dorsey later, she was signed to the Apollo label and recorded Herbert Brewster's "Move On up a Little Higher." It sold half a million copies, and the snowball effect took hold. From her

first notes on record, she projected an image of a woman of moral force and unwavering faith, one grateful for and humbled by God's promise of eternal life. Her arsenal was formidable: swoops, shouts, foreboding guttural moans, diction precise and clipped as appropriate, or swaggering, loose and bluesy, rife with bent notes and phrases stretched tantalizingly into illuminating subtextual messages.

In 1954, she made the big time, signing with Columbia and hosting her own CBS radio show. From that moment, Mahalia Jackson was the most popular and influential gospel artist in America, indeed, in the world. She made effective use of her personal bully pulpit, throwing herself into a number of social causes and becoming a bulwark of support to her friend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. during the Civil Rights movement of the Fifties and Sixties.

While a case can be made that all we need to know about Mahalia Jackson we can learn from her music, her spoken words, as heard on the Smithsonian/Folkways release *I Sing Because I'm Happy*, are equally gripping. Here Jackson sings only four songs, which are interspersed between interviews conducted in 1952 by independent filmmaker Jules Schwerin. These were to form the basis for a film rooted in the black experience, centering on Jackson's life and work. Anyone who would pretend to understand this great American artist – musically, spiritually, emotionally – must spend some time with her painful, sometimes horrifying but often loving reminiscences about growing up black and poor in the South. Her forceful, clearheaded view of gospel music – "these songs are the staff of life" – will energize your spirit, driving you back to the recordings for even more sustenance.

Through it all – the hardships as well as the acclaim – she never lost her focus. She remembered her God and His commandments and refused to yield to baser instincts trying to lure her from the higher ground she sought. In her imperfections, in her humility, in her quest for salvation – in her humanity – she remained unabashedly, unequivocally Mahalia. But when her voice soared Heavenward in the glorious testimony that was hers alone, it did what the voices of all great artists do: It became our voice, our common, eternal cry of the soul. We are enriched for having had her here among us. ◀

