

## Cleveland and the Rise of Gospel Blues



*Photograph by Allen E. Cole, courtesy of Frederick Burton.*

In Post-World War I Era Cleveland, a popular destination for African American migrants from the South, gospel music became increasingly popular. This growing popularity was due in no small measure to the business acumen of people like Claude Shields Sr., quartet singer and owner of the Shields Brothers Cleaners on Cedar Avenue. Since the 1920s, Cleveland's gospel quartet artists have not hesitated to support the recording of the music, public programs, and publications about gospel's influence on other styles of American music, including Rock and Roll.

Frederick Burton, whose family migrated to Cleveland from Tennessee in the 1960s, is the author of *Cleveland's Gospel Music* (Arcadia, 2003) and founder of the Gospel Music Historical Society. In 2005, he and other artists participated in "Nearer My God to Thee," during the Rock Hall's tribute to Sam Cooke, a Mississippi native and migrant to Chicago. Cooke gained a national following as a member of the Soul Stirrers gospel quartet and as a solo artist.

In *The Rise of Gospel Blues: The Music of Thomas A. Dorsey in the Urban Church* (Oxford, 1992), Dr. Michael Harris suggests that Dorsey, a Georgia native and former pianist for blues legend Ma Rainey, was “The Father of Gospel Music.” Dorsey became director of music at Chicago’s Pilgrim Baptist Church in the 1920s and later founded the National Convention of Gospel Choirs and Choruses (NCGCC). The Greater Cleveland Choral Chapter of NCGCC is still active in 2020.