

RAMSEY LEWIS

with one voice

It was in the mid-1940s when the pastor of Wayman African Methodist Episcopal Church appointed our father, Ramsey Emmanuel Lewis Sr., to the directorship of the Gospel Chorus. The church, as well as many other black churches in the 1940s, had become involved in the experiences of the golden age of gospel music...a musical genre pioneered by Thomas A. Dorsey and others in the 1930s. This was an exciting time in the history of black music.

The bond that connected the Lewis family was strong — a deep abiding relationship with God — was expressed through music. Ramsey, Jr. was an adolescent at the time, and Chicago Musical College was training him to become a concert pianist. He was forming a solid foundation in classical music, but because of the Godly insight of his pastor and the God-given wisdom of our parents, Ramsey, at nine years of age, was appointed to play for the Gospel Chorus. He embraced the sounds, rhythms, and melodies of gospel music without resistance. To date, Ramsey has the distinction of being the youngest musician to serve the Gospel Chorus. For seven years, Ramsey played for the Gospel Chorus every Sunday morning. He played for weddings, funerals, church banquets, and teas. And every third Sunday evening Ramsey accompanied the Gospel Chorus in a mini-musical.

Ramsey's training at Chicago Musical College was indispensable, but on the weekends he experienced a musical nurturing that fueled his creative mind and spirit. The Chicago Union of the National Convention of Gospel Choirs and Choruses met every Saturday at Metropolitan Community Church. These Saturday evenings drew gospel musicians, composers, writers, and singers from the area to network, exchange ideas and input, and teach. In the midst of this historic musical assemblage sat a young Ramsey, absorbing every note, chord, and riff he heard — every one cementing a repertoire of melodies and improvisations that has become a part of his signature style.

Several years ago, Ramsey began to realize how deeply the music of the church had become embedded in his mind, soul, and spirit. He arranged an instrumental medley of gospel songs to include in his concerts. The national and international audience response was immediate. For Ramsey it was an acknowledgement — a validation — of a lifetime of music...words and melodies that endured.

When I was six years old and Ramsey was four, we were taken by the hand and led to the home of our church organist, who was a well-known piano teacher on the near north side of Chicago. One hour of practice at the piano was truly painful for me! Not so for Ramsey. He completed the beginner's book months before I did. The teacher soon recognized that Ramsey was definitely gifted. Right before our eyes we could see that chronological age had nothing to do with innate ability. Ramsey soon advanced to more challenging music.

The students' recitals were held in June every year at our church. Ramsey was one of the students selected to perform a piece at the end of the program. He always remained quiet and unmoved by the amazement expressed about his piano playing. Even though he wanted to do all the after school activities the other boys in the neighborhood were doing, our Dad's mandate was "play is not the priority, practicing your piano lesson and doing your school work are to be done first — in that order." Mother was in full agreement.

Ramsey's role models became church musicians and classical pianists. When asked to play a piano solo, most always during a program at a church, Ramsey played a classical selection — Bach, Beethoven, Chopin, Debussy, Brahms, Mendelssohn — which was always well received and the encore would either be a familiar hymn or gospel song.

Ramsey played seasonal music together with the church organist, Elnora Carter, such as selections from Handel's *Messiah*. A friend, whose name I can't recall, who visited often, asked to play a song with a violin bow and a saw — and yes, Ramsey would accompany him! Any individual or group of singers that came to a service who did not have a pianist would ask Ramsey to play. They simply had to begin singing and before they had the first five words out, Ramsey was softly playing the on-pitch chords! Sometimes, the sound was more of a "joyful noise" but Ramsey could help the person with a piano accompaniment.

Where else would an African American youngster with so much talent get his experience except in the church? The historical background of African Methodism provided the rich musical soil that Ramsey needed.

For everything there is a season. Ramsey loves music and has patiently allowed the musical seasons to move him to the next one. He has accepted each one and worked diligently through each of these phases of his musical life.

It was after church service one Sunday morning (by now our family had moved on to Mount Carmel A.M.E. church), that one of the other church musicians, Wallace Burton, approached Ramsey and asked him to join his seven-piece jazz band called the Cleffs. Wallace, judging by the way Ramsey played gospel and classical music, thought that he could no doubt play jazz as well. He was wrong! After the first song of Ramsey's debut with the group, Wallace asked that he sit out the rest of the set. However, he decided he still wanted Ramsey in the band and invited him to come to his home and there began Ramsey's exposure to the history, traditions, and language of jazz improvisation.

Dad took us to the Regal Theater and to the Chicago Theatre to see live stage shows with Count Basie, Lionel Hampton, Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, Earl Hines, Ella Fitzgerald, Nat "King" Cole, and others of that era. But an ad in the newspaper was as close as we came to Ravinia Festival.

The first season Ramsey performed at Ravinia Festival was 1966. Since then he has performed there numerous times, and in 1992 was asked to become the Artistic Director for Jazz. By 1996, it was the season to include the Sanctuary Choir of James Memorial African Methodist Episcopal Church, where I am co-pastor, in the program at Ravinia. It was about eight years ago when Ramsey mentioned doing a gospel CD that would include our church choir. Ramsey embarked on the project but scheduling conflicts caused it to be postponed. Obviously, that was not the season. The Sanctuary Choir and the New Vision Choir combined to sing with him once again for his new CD at Ravinia. As the rehearsals progressed, it became clear to Ramsey that this was the season to do a live recording of the CD at James Memorial Church on May 31, 2005.

The sanctuary was filled with worshipers praising God and Ramsey mentioned that it was a like a real revival meeting!

Because of his sincere and genuine love for music, Ramsey often reaches out to include other vocal or instrumental artists to enhance the program. This was the season for three accomplished gospel performers to make their debut at the performance during the Ravinia Festival — Darius Brooks, Donald Lawrence, and Smokie Norful.

This was not Ramsey's first time performing religious music publicly. His unique style and versatility exemplify a fresh awakening in the sound of gospel music. The excitement generated by Ramsey is stimulating to observe and it is awesome to see his spirit-filled musicianship along with such skillful, discreet showmanship.

Ramsey, our younger sister, Gloria and I — along with our families — dedicate this CD to the reflective reminiscences of our parents, Ramsey, Sr. and Pauline Lewis.

Rev. Lucille L. Jackson
Co-Pastor, James Memorial AME Church
Maywood IL

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