

Hear His Voice

Robert Robinson brings gospel music to the masses across the Midwest

BY COURTNEY LEWIS

(page 1 of 2)



PHOTO BY DAVID ELLIS

THERE ARE BIGGER things in life than Robert Robinson, but the stocky gospel singer has a way of putting everything else out of mind—except, of course, for God. When Robinson sings “O Holy Night,” fans break out in tears. With his angelic voice and cherubic figure, Robinson has been called “the Pavarotti of gospel.” It’s not the music alone that motivates him—though it is what propelled his 15 years with Lorie Line and appearances with Aretha Franklin, Jermaine Jackson, Barry Manilow, Kenny Loggins, Prince, and such local favorites as the Steeles and Sounds of Blackness. The message of gospel—songs pulled from the Bible, lyrics of praise and worship—has enabled him to find his greater purpose.

This past year, Robinson’s love for gospel music led him to stop touring and return home to focus on the Twin Cities Community Gospel Choir (TCCGC), which he founded in 1990. He initially juggled commitments, but now is solely dedicated to the choir, which recently wrapped up a holiday concert tour—Robinson’s first without Line.

At a recent TCCGC practice, Robinson sits behind a desk littered with song charts for “Go Tell It on the Mountain” and “A King Is Born,” along with driving directions to an upcoming concert at Paramount Theatre in St. Cloud. Acolytes approach and ask about the verses, wondering if they’re singing “Joy to the World” with enough “attitudinal flair,” as one long-time singer phrases it. The group is diverse, but when members open their mouths to find the key, their voices become one.

Their dedication advances them, Robinson says, but whether members are motivated by the music or their director is hard to gauge. As they rehearse, toes tap and heads bob along with the rhythm of the drum. A few of the singers break out in laughter after Robinson jokes about bringing food for their trip (“I wouldn’t suggest bringing fried chicken or pork chops ’cause you might get jumped”). Their leader hasn’t just charmed them—he’s earned their respect: after creating a national following with Line, Robinson left to shepherd his own ensemble—to St. Cloud, Arden Hills, and St. Paul.

Line remains one of his biggest fans. “He was amazing,” Line says. “Just his voice and his presence were altogether...unforgettable.” But at 46, Robinson was ready to take the lead and realize his mission of sharing gospel music through the TCCGC wherever there’s an audience.

“When you find a group of people that will follow you to the ends of the earth, you better stay with ’em,” he says. “And that’s what I’ve found in this choir.”

GOSPEL MUSIC was popularized in African-American Baptist churches in the early 20th century, but it stems from 17th-century spirituals. When African slaves arrived in the New World, their masters took away their drums. Slaves created their own beats by clapping hands and stomping feet, augmenting spirituals framed by “call-and-response” formats. African-American religious music evolved with instruments, verses, and refrains, and, over the decades, new urban music.

Although gospel is often associated with black houses of worship in the South, there is also white gospel, sometimes referred to as Southern or country gospel. That sound was made famous by June Carter Cash’s family, and more recently by the evangelical pastor Billy Graham. While country gospel takes a folksy approach, black gospel is soulful and jazzy. The two bear a similar message and can intertwine (in fact, Robinson sang at the 1996 Twin Cities Billy Graham Crusade), but they differ in style; black gospel is often unpredictable in its course. The improvisation on notes makes it challenging to master. Imagine Julie Andrews instructing the von Trapp children to run the musical scales of “Do-Re-Mi” with a gospel slant, asking little Gretel to give the song more attitude.



PHOTO BY TOM WALLACE

Robinson grew up in a musical family, deeply rooted in the teaching of the Christian church—his father was pastor and his mother led the musical ministry. Six-year-old Robert and his three siblings formed the Robinson Children group, with young Robert singing the lead.

“My mother didn’t want to lead, so she figured the best way to get a backup was to work her kids, and she did.” Robinson’s older brother, now also a pastor, played drums, while the girls accompanied Robert’s vocals. The siblings remain close, members and leaders in the TCCGC.

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(page 2 of 2)

Robinson continued to sing with the church over the years, but pushed himself into popular music, looking to expand his range. He became a favorite at area karaoke bars. “I would sing songs that had absolutely nothing to do with God,” he says. “People would come up to me at the end crying, just crying. That was a powerful thing. It helped me realize that what I have to give is touched by God. And that if I can share it, then I’m providing more and more people with that touch, that connection to God.”

Sharing his voice wasn’t a solo mission—he needed backup. So Robinson enlisted his siblings to form a new choir and encouraged new members by not requiring auditions. TCCGC gained recognition that first year: four months after its first rehearsal, the choir won the Minnesota State Fair Amateur Talent Contest. They returned the following year to present 13 concerts, and have completed three recordings to date, including *Make Me an Instrument*, which was included on local top-10 lists in 1996.

Few gospel choirs then—none in Minnesota—extended beyond the church. Now 100-strong, the unconstrained TCCGC remains the state’s most-decorated gospel group. The choir continues to gain converts; some eventually become members, hoping to fully experience the music. But its growth is better measured in quality than quantity.

“You all signed up for gospel choir and now you’re all reading charts, professional charts,” says guest singer and voice coach Holly Collison to the novices. “And they’re hard, so I’m really impressed.”

Although there is little structure in gospel music, the “call-and-response” refrain that began with spirituals makes the style seem easy to pick up. But there are challenges in teaching gospel, says Sanford Moore, director of the University of Minnesota Gospel Choir, who took over the 10-year-old program when founder Sam Davies died. Moore focuses the popular program, which has grown from about a dozen singers to 230, on history and musical style, which he notes as more percussive. “I can’t really teach them gospel music,” he says. “It’s something they have to experience.”

In that, Moore sees an obvious difference between his student choir and the church choir he directs at Fellowship Missionary Baptist Church in north Minneapolis. “I have to break it down a lot more,” he says. “When I present a song, I have to talk about what the song means so they know why they have to sing it that way,” Moore says. “At church, it’s a given. It’s felt. It’s understood.” Regardless, Moore says the change in his U students over the semester is “like night and day. Many of them tell me how the experience has uplifted them. Gospel encourages the soul.”

AT PARAMOUNT THEATRE, the center of St. Cloud’s arts district, the audience for TCCGC’s first holiday concert of the 2006 season gets gospel. Home to a symphony orchestra, touring local and national troupes, and a visual-arts center, the Paramount is a small stop for the TCCGC, which has performed at the Guthrie Theater, the Metrodome, the Governor’s Mansion, and Kirby Puckett’s memorial service. But the audience is ready to listen. Robinson speaks to the crowd as if they are old friends, explaining the origins of “Down Home Christmas,” an original country song that is a nod to his Southern parents. He discusses how his music and choir have developed and the messages of his favorite songs.

“I think the music is a way of watering the dryness of an individual drought,” Robinson says. “If I’m able to do that with my music—if I’m able to do that in a bar, if I can do it in a theater, if I can do it in a prison—wherever there’s an open door of people that need it and want it, then I’m willing to go there. Because I feel that people everywhere, no matter our status or color or anything, we’re all dry and dying from something.” Judging from the multiple ovations at the Paramount Theatre, the thirst has been quenched.

Courtney Lewis is editorial assistant at Minnesota Monthly.

The Twin Cities Community Gospel Choir will perform at the O’Shaughnessy in St. Paul on February 25. Call 651-690-6700 for tickets, or visit www.tccgospel.org for more concert dates.