

10-18-2000

Interview with John Buell Edmonds (FA 198)

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Recommended Citation

Folklife Archives, Manuscripts &, "Interview with John Buell Edmonds (FA 198)" (2000). *FA Oral Histories*. Paper 105.
http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/dlsc_fa_oral_hist/105

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Interviewee: John Buell Edmonds (Buell taken from an uncle)

448 Webb Ave, Bowling Green, KY 42101. 270-745-6980

Interviewed by: Michelle Ross, Folk Studies Student on October 18, 2000

Topic: Traditional Sacred Music Performer, Songwriter, Choir Director at Mt. Zion Baptist Church, Piano Player, Leader of Gospel Quartet, "Gospel Truth"

Born: March 2, 1945

m- what kind of music do you sing?

j- Gospel, I guess—anything that has a message of love and hope. Hard core Gospel, Broadway show tunes like "impossible dream" an old rock and roll song from the 60s "walk a mile in my shoes. A lot of people wouldn't classify these as gospel songs, but I incorporate them in my repertoire. Basically, I still consider myself as gospel singer.

m- you mentioned "hard core gospel"—what is hard core gospel verses gospel?

j- traditional gospel music that flourished from the 1930s to maybe the 1960s. and it's still being performed today, but some of your newer artists, like Kurt Franklin, they are doing what is now termed as "contemporary gospel" and it's more closely related to jazz and R&B. so hard core to me is the old "Mahala Jackson" type hard core.

m- what is the difference between gospel and spiritual? Do you perform spiritual as well?

j- some—the spiritual I perform is with a gospel flavor. When I hear the word spiritual spoken, I usually think of the slave songs—songs that came out of slavery. "Go down Moses" "Steal Away" they usually had an ambiguous message, an underline message—they were sung out in the cotton fields.

Gospel songs came into being around the 30s—of course gospel songs came out of the spirituals and people like Thomas A. Dorsey, who was considered the father of gospel music, he was the former ragtime, jazz, whatever and the pianist for such performers as Bessie Smith and (R. Raney?). then suddenly he crosses over and begins to do religious music, but it still has the same flavor of the blues and the jazz he had been playing. He was the first person, according to what I've read to coin the word "gospel music"—"gospel singers" and this was in the 30s.

And when I think of spirituals I think of more rigid ness in structure—a true-formed gospel song can be performed in many different ways, at different occasions, by the same person. It depends on the mood, the setting, the audience and the performer. Whereas the spiritual is usually going to be performed the same way every time, but there's a lot of improvisation in gospel music.

m- I've heard spirituals performed by full men's choirs and Moses Hogan—have you heard of Moses Hogan? Their performance of spirituals, although in harmony, are structured, so I think I understand what you're saying.

j- Usually if you hear a spiritual one time and request it at another concert, it's gonna be heard the same. It's getting to the point that a lot of the gospel music coming out now is getting more rigid; there's not a lot of room for improvisation. Everything is usually tightly orchestrated now, which is different from the older days.

m- would say this is true if it were performed in a church setting? It that true in that situation as well?

j- it pretty much has to be. You think, if you have a piano, a tambourine and a vocalist then you have room for moving in a different direction, on more than one

occasion, and everybody will kick in, but if you've got a full rhythm section, you've got a keyboard, you've got piano, organ, you've got bass or lead guitar, you may even have a brass section or some strings, you don't have any room for improvisation, because you lose everybody. You have a big mess, but there's a lot to be said for both ways. A director may wish to go or move the choir in a different direction, and it usually works both ways.

m- do you also perform "shout"?

j- sure. Shout has always been part of my group's performance. somewhere in our performance we always would incorporate the "holy dance." Actually this goes back to one of my idols—the "Clara Ward Singers"—they were very animated. The holy dance came out of the sanctified churches or the holiness churches—Pentecostal, apostolic—they've even been called holy rollers. The holy dance was part of their worship service. If you want to read about it you'd find out the holy went on in biblical times—it's still part of a lot of churches—it spilled over into the Baptist churches—even in a lot of your black Baptist.

m- when does a song move into dance? When does a song move from being sung to being sung and moved?

j- actually when people get so caught up in the Holy Spirit that they'll start dancing. Dancing is a form of—dancing in the spirit is a form of expressing oneself, then dancing in the spirit is also a form a praise. It's hard to say when that magic moment hits and a person is inspired to break out into a holy dance.

m- does the music change, too? If the singer feels inspired by the holy spirit, does the music increase in volume and in tempo? And does that inspire the dance or is it all happening at the same time?

j- it's overlapping. The music will inspire the dance, and sometimes the dance. I've been in some church services and once the drums kick in a certain beat and the organ and piano chime right in then everybody in the church will break out in a dance. And then I've seen it happen in the reverse. Where everything will be in a slow pace, calm situation, then all of a sudden someone will break out in a dance and the music will kick in right behind them. It's hard to say which came first, the chicken or the egg.

m-you mentioned sacred music to me—is there a difference with sacred from what's been talked about?

j- first of all, it's all sacred, but when I hear the expression "sacred" I think of something that's written, with no room for improvisation at all. You follow written music, very rigid sort of fashion. There's a lot more discipline in opposition to improvisation.

M - is gospel not written?

j- it's performed first and usually it's written later. in fact professor Dorsey who I mentioned earlier, he read and wrote music. But a lot of your gospel singers that came along in the 50s and 60s , even into the 70s didn't read or write, and in fact when they'd go into the studios to record, the music studios would put out music, but that was usually after the fact. They would usually bring in somebody who would sit down and listen to all the tracks and then write out the music.

In fact, I don't think I have any music to anything I teach my choirs. I usually have to get a CD or a tape and listen to it then transfer it to a piano. Most of your choir members don't read or write (music) anyway, and you teach them their parts by memory, and sing it out to them. most people who sing in choirs just have that innate ability sing a harmony part without any instruction. It's just sort of a natural talent some people have.

m- have you heard the word "hegemony" —it's not structured harmony—it's felt harmony. (I don't know if the correct word or my understanding of its meaning is correct) Is that what you're referring to when you mention innate harmony?

j- close to it pretty much. I like to think what I do is more structured—I do plan it out, and we rehearse it, but a lot of times with my group, we're so used to working with each other, I can give everybody their beginning note on a particular song and can follow along with their harmony part. There are some things that are intricate and you have to just break them down and learn it phrase by phrase, part by part in order to get it just like you want it.

A lot of the gospel groups from the 50s and 60s they just simply harmonized.

They would get together and rehearse and everybody would just find their part, because a lot of your gospel groups especially your male quartets, they didn't even have any type of accompaniment, so they didn't have a piano to give them a note to follow or any other instrument. It was (hygemony) (?) finding one's harmony—

m- is there an occasion that you would perform one genre over another or do you blend them together?

j- it depends on the type of audience you have—you try to gear yourself as where you can best reach people. For instance if I was doing a performance in a night club and lets say most of the people aren't deeply religious, then I would do lighter weight things. Whereas if I were in a Holiness Church, I would do things that they could relate to. If I were in a Methodist church—you usually think of Methodist as being a little more subdued and quiet in their worship service, then I would do something closer to sacred music. All in all when I have just a regular audience, I try to do all of it.

m- how long have you been performing—for yourself, church, audience?

j- I started playing for a church when I was fourteen years old—41 years ago! I was youth choir director for our church and a lot of members were older than I was, but it was never a problem.

m- how is it you started at fourteen—did you learn at home?

j- I started taking piano lessons at 7 years old. Actually--I'd forgotten this--I started playing for Sunday school when I was about 12—then I was asked for this church to play for their youth choir—I was 14 there.

m- were you scared?

j- oh gosh, I still get scared!

m- do you recall the first time you heard gospel or is this part of your life?

j- actually my parents and my older brother, my grandmother, aunts and uncles, they were in a choir at church, and they did gospel music. This was my first time ever hearing gospel. When I grew up before that choir was organized all the music was strictly out of the hymn book—no music improvised, or foot-padding in the church I grew up in. then

the minister in this church organized a choir in memory of my grandfather, and the choir was named after him—the Frierson Memorial. It was made up of a lot of family members and a lot of non-family members, too.

I thought it was really fascinating because it had the rhythm and the beat and it was something, you know that is easy to feel an emotion behind, because so much emotion is put into the music by the singers. So even for a little kid like me can feel the emotion.

m- what church did you grow up in?

j- State Street Baptist

that's the one that burned down last year. what an honor to be placed on your grandfather.

j- my grandfather was a deacon for the church. Now he died when my mother was five or six. She didn't even have any memories of him. But he had been a staunch worker, a deacon. So when this new minister came in the late 40s, he went over the old records and saw all things he had done in contributing and building the church into what it was, that he decided to honor him.

m- is it still named in his honor?

j- no, it's non-existent. They did a recording back in 1951-52 on an old 78. Back then you could go to the radio station and you could make a recording of yourself and they would give you copies—not enough to sell, but so everybody in the family would have one. I ran across it three or four years ago and I had it put onto a CD, and I had their picture all processed and I gave one to all the family members as Christmas gifts. They were really surprised to see that.

m- do you recall an individual or a particular moment that was decisive—that you knew that you wanted to sing gospel music for the rest of your life, or at least that you knew that it was going to be a part of your life?

j- hearing my folks sings, I use to pretend that I was playing for them, even though I didn't really know how to play then, and that was always a dream of mine. But one Christmas holiday season Mahalia Jackson did a performance on the Steve Allen Show and I was just mesmerized. it was the first time I had heard her sing; it just made me know then, "that's what I wanted to do." to listen to her sing—they didn't show the lady who was accompanying her—the chords and the rifts and the style she was playing—I was completely in awe.

m- how old were you then?

j- maybe 7 – 8. Maybe 9, because it was in 1954. Probably 1954.

m- why is this music important to you? Why aren't you singing R&B or jazz?

j- I don't want to sound like an over-religious fanatic, because I'm not, I don't see anything wrong with singing any type of music in fact, I like to listen to all kinds of music—I love R&B, I love Gladys Knight, I love Barbara Striesand, Liza Manelli, Teddy Pendergrass, The Temptations, I don't know. it's just that I feel like this is what I'm suppose do, and I'm not trying to be spiritual or over religious and say this is my calling, it just basically is what I'm suppose to be doing.

m- well is it a calling.

j- I never heard a voice, but I believe we're all here for specific reasons, and I don't know, who's to say that one song that I performed in front of somebody, it may have inspired that person to go on and design a new space ship that will carry us all into

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outer space—who knows. Everything is in a pattern, like a puzzle, and we all have our piece in it.

I've sang other songs, in weddings I'll sing whatever they request. For a funeral I learned Luther Vandross—he's a popular R&B singer. There was a lady in her 30s who had died and she wanted the song sung at her funeral that had been sung at her wedding.

Like I said, I don't have any qualms about singing any kind of music, but if I'm doing a concert, it's gonna be something that is inspirational or has a message in it, whether you want to deem it to be a religious or just a message of hope.

m- did that message ever come back to you? You know, you're singing it—did the singer ever hear the message as if someone else were saying it?

j- that's happened a lot of times, yes. I try to zero in on the words to the song—whatever or wherever I'm singing it. a lot of times the words of the song can strike me to where I can be moved to tears—sure!—usually every time I sing, I'm revived or moved in some kind of way. I won't say every time—there have been times when I've gone through a whole concert and just didn't feel anything, and I've learned that you should never let that scare you or effect you. There have been times when I thought my performance was the worst, and then someone would come up and say how they were moved or how they were inspired, and how it rejuvenated them, so I said, well, you know just let it keep working that way. Then again, on the other hand I am sort of revived when I sing.

Then again, sometimes I could be sitting at the piano, be singing and be moved here by myself.

m- Maxine Ray told me that you were the music director for her church, and that you directed for every age group and four choirs were involved. What are the four choirs?

j- we have the Seniors, the Inspirational choir which is made up of what they like to call “the young adults” but they’ve been “young adults” for about 15 – 20 years and they’re still thinking along those lines. And then we have an all male chorus, they we have about 35 youngsters ranging in age from 5 – 15 in a youth choir.

m- with four separate choirs, do you direct them differently or do you teach them the same.

j- no, with the senior choir I teach them more of the traditional gospel songs. Even with some of the current things that are out now, I still teach in the traditional vein. With the male chorus I usually pick songs from the gospel quartet style. The kids I try to do a lot of the contemporary things that they’re hearing today. With the inspirational choir we do a mixture of everything. We do older traditionals, we do modern contemporary, and we do some of the quartet style songs. The inspirational is kinds of a mixture of all into one choir.

m- have quartets been formed from your male choir?

J- no. in fact I think some of them have performed in quartets. And when I say quartets, I don’t necessarily mean “four people singing.” Quartet is a style, more so than a four-part harmony. In fact some of your quartets will consist of 5-7— sometimes 9 guys, but they have what is considered the quartet style.

m- which is?

j- your four-part harmony—bass, tenor, baritone, your counter-tenor. A lot of quartets will have two or three lead singers—some of them lead, while others stand in the back as back-up but they still fall into that category.

m- is your group a quartet?

j- our group doesn't sing the quartet style. I don't have a name for the category we would fall under. In the 60s—maybe even in the 50s, the gospel singer James Cleveland from Chicago and Los Angeles, he innovated a form of singing that completely left out the bass part. You had your tenors, your altos and sopranos and sometimes your higher soprano. You had your four parts but you didn't have your bottom part, your bass. This is what led to what you hear today—when you hear Kirk Franklin's groups perform, you don't hear a bass part; you just hear a three part harmony—even though you hear three part harmony—you hear a mixture of male and female voices. This is the style I pretty much follow with my group. I teach bass parts, and I've had groups with a bass in them, so you pretty much have to give them a part to sing, but I think the fact that bass singers are so rare, a lot of your choir directors don't have a part for a bass vocalist.

I did a workshop for a choir in Burkesville (?) and it was a mixture of the whole community—around 65 people. We worked with them for about three days and we presented a concert on the fourth of July that year. when I was dividing everybody up, we had some people that were some bases—we had one guy and three ladies that were actually basses. The ladies, I mean they carried the whole part.

m- what part do you sing?

j- tenor.

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m- how long has your group been together?

j- since 1964—not the same people.

m- do you perform often?

j- yes, we do a lot of work with the different arts councils across the state. Amusement parks, state parks and the like. We're not as active as we used to be in the 50s and the 80s, but I'm trying to get back into it a little bit more.

m- do you choose your music ahead or is music played with spontaneity?

j- if something special is going on, I might pick out something Sunday morning, but usually we schedule everything prior to Sunday morning. But if I'm doing a concert with my whole group, I'll plan out. Now in the old days I didn't. back in the 60s and 70s, I performed everything playing it by ear. As I've gotten older, I plan out. Now if I'm out there by myself, I have a beginning and an ending, but I don't plan what I'm doing in between.

m- what dictates your actions—audience, the group—

j- if something moves me, I'll go in a different direction and we all have understanding to be ready for whatever comes around. (use church service as an example) I wouldn't pull a surprise on somebody and sing something we hadn't rehearsed.

In 1974 we worked in Opryland—74 and 75—and we had to do 5 shows in a day and sometimes 7, six days a week, and there were times when you get bored with what you're doing. So we'd be back in the dressing room and we'd say "let's try this.." if it was in the middle of the week and the audience was small, we'd improvise. We'd go for something new and if worked we'd do it again, if not, we'd wouldn't try it again.

m- do you sing with or without accompaniment?

j- with. I play piano, which is an advantage. I don't have to worry about if I have musician and then not showing up, I can go on anyway.

m- you read music, right? Do you play by ear, too?

j- yes, I have to; if you're gonna play for a Black church you're gonna have to know how to play by ear, because so much isn't written. Even with a lot of R&B material the latest music that's out there on the radio, you can't find music for it until months later. song comes first, then the printed version. If you want to keep up with what the gospel choirs are doing, you pretty much have to be able to figure it out by tape.

m- how do you keep up?

j- my choir members always keep me up—they're always bring me a tape—I have the reputation of being the worst person to give a tape to. It's impossible to keep—I have my group, I have my solo career and I have my choirs, and for some strange reason, it's easier to work with a group you get your repertoire built up and with myself and people expect to hear the same songs whenever you go back. But church choirs want to sing something new every Sunday. And I tell them, "you can't learn that quick."

m- do you write music?

j- traditional, moving into the contemporary. It depends on how you look at it.

m- do you allow movement and improvisation with your written music

j- more structured most of the time. The first recording we did we did with Nashville Records—I didn't produce them, I just performed—we had me on piano, three of us sang and a drummer to make sure the timing was in sync. Then the studio hired musicians to come in to add the strings and the horns. When we moved back to BG in 87, we started producing on our independent label, and I had to start teaching all

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the instruments. I had to break it down in sections, then after awhile it became regimented and everything had to fall in place. It had to be structured then.

Something improvising can lead to out of context sound and you can't allow for that.

m- what was the first song you performed in public

j- I grew up in State Street Church and I was about 3 or 4—I can remember it clearly—they had the cradle room department. They told us Bible stories and we played with blocks. My uncle had an old 78 at my grandmother's house and it made reference to praying and a deacon and I thought it was a church song. On this particular Sunday morning, all my family was in different parts of the church in their respective classes and they had me in the cradle room and us singing little songs. (sings a little ditty) "I was my hands this morning,.." then I raised my hands and I said, "I know a song" and the last part of the song goes like this (sings) "well they called on deacon Jones to pray/all he could say was 'hey, hey'/ who put the whisky in the well?" That was my debut. My mother was so embarrassed; she said you could hear me all over the church.

Field notes:

October 22, 2000

I attended the 11:00 church service at Mt. Zion Baptist Church in Bowling Green, Kentucky. Rev. Roy Sweatt has been the pastor for 17 ½ years. the pastor before him served for 45 years. Maxine's mother said "for some of us, church is all we've got."

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She could "feel" that I was not a threat, but it also seemed obvious that I did not understand the fullness of what she was telling me. "Like family" is what I heard repeatedly. Even as an outsider, that statement was obvious in many ways. Familiarity-- something I could observe, and experience it to a degree, but not fathom the depth of.

It was the 4th Sunday of the month, and on that Sunday the children's choir sing. I arrived just before the service began; devotional prayer and praise was going on. a woman from the congregation started to sing a call and response gospel tune and the rest of the congregation joined her in singing. The first line called out was, "what do you know about Jesus?" The response line was "He's alright" John followed her cue and began to play piano and he was joined by a member of the church on drums.

The service is divided into ten parts: Processional, devotion, altar prayer, acknowledgement of visitors, announcements, offering, scripture selection, God's message, invitation and benediction. A song, prayer, or some sort of ritual accompanies every segment. Some of what accompanies is planned, while there may also be a spontaneous response.

At the beginning of the service, the children's choir marched down the aisle. There were about 30-40 children ranging from 4 or 5 to 15 years old. It was a slow, rhythmic walk; when a forward step was taken (I counted One) the back foot caught up with the front foot at the count of two before the next step was taken.

John played piano in front of the church; a microphone was attached to the piano where he sang into. Everyone I mean everyone celebrated through smiles, laughs and clapping hands as the children marched, as if they were marching for the first time and the adults

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were full of pride as they watched. But it wasn't the first time; where did this celebration come from?

Words to songs: "we're marchin to Zion/ its's the city of God"

"all my burdens, I'll be taking to the Savior/ ain't that good news?"

"good news the chariots coming" 4 Xs/ coming to take me home/ swing low, sweet chariot/comin to carry me home"

"being satisfied" 2 Xs/ since I met Jesus, been satisfied/yes, been satisfied"

"I can wait on the Holy Spirit"

"What a friend we have in Jesus"

"reach out and touch somebody's hand" congregation shakes hands while song is played during the benediction—and end of the service.

November 5, 2000

This was the first Sunday, and the men's choir sang. They also marched rhythmically and slowly down the aisle.

Shouts of Amen and affirmations are intimately part of music and prayer. It is hard to write about this without taking away the actual experience. To say verbal affirmations--spontaneous expressions of prayer--getting on one's knees, raising one's hands, crying,

clapping, is natural is true. But then a scholar may ask, "true to what?" or What empirical evidence tells you that what you see and hear or feel is natural—what does natural mean?

The announcements included reading thank you cards sent to the church, birthday announcements and addressing social issues relevant to them as African Americans.

Songs: innovation of a Negro Sprititual "nobody knows the troubles I've seen/ nobody knows my sorrow/ nobody knows the troubles I've seen/ nobody but Jesus"
"I'll go, send me"

woman from the congregation: "I will trust in the Lord until I die/ I'm gonna stay on the battle field until I die/ I'm gonna treat everybody right until I die/I'm gonna stay on my knees until I die"

a male deacon: "lead me Jesus, lead me/ everywhere I go, take me by the hand and lead me on"

choir: "I know I've been changed" with a male soloist leading the verses. Choir and congregation sang refrain. This song created an emotional response from many people in choir and congregation. Song took on life of its own. Pastor Sweatt acknowledged the anointing of the Holy Spirit and the need to let the anointing "have its way."

November 12, 2000

The step of the choir procession was different: on a two, beginning with the left leg, there was a step forward on the count of one, the right leg moved up to the left foot at the count of two. This was done three times, then on the fourth step, the choir took one step backward to begin the process again.

Certain members of the church are recognizing me and inviting me to join in worship any time. I would like that. My daughters Kathleen and Christina came with me, as well as another graduate student, Mikki. It is my third week to sit with Maxine's mother Marjorie.

I noticed that John directs from the piano more with the Inspirational Choir than with the children's or men's. He uses voice inflection or may point upward to direct the choir to sing higher or point to the floor to direct the choir to sing in a lower key. He also lines out the verses. Jesse, the drummer follows along intuitively. He has been drumming for twenty-two years, and sixteen for the Mt. Zion.

Offertory: sung every week and everyone sings along as plate is being passed and as the congregation marches up to the front of the church to put their money in the plate or tithe box, or to give a special offering at the table reserved for such donations. Everyone participates, even small children. "the more you give, the more will be given to you/ just keep on giving/ because it's really true.