

and fettered by my past. Something about the music...and the people drew me closer.

Five years as a stranger, an outsider. Finally I asked whether this old, white man could join the Gospel Choir. A "no" might have been more merciful. But Cooky said, "Yes." And so began years of Gospel hugs. "Give it up for Brother Pete." "Brother Pete, lead us in prayer." "Brother Pete, sing this verse."

What are the distinctive aspects of Gospel music? "Attitude and interpretation!" What about notes and timing? What does a soloist "do" precisely? Is there sheet music for my part? "No. Feel the song and listen to the Spirit." Lynda Barry says, "Gospel singing...is the rawest, sweetest, uninhibited and exquisite sounds a person can make or hear, It isn't music, it's an entire experience you feel and live." I was asked to lead on the classic spiritual "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot." Jumping into the no-notes, feel-the-song, no-net, bare-your-soul world of Gospel music. Singing as my spirit gave me ideas, notes, words. Sweating. Worrying. Then Brother Clarence called out, "Amen. That's right." No longer alone, hugged by his words, I sang what my heart felt, I shared the message that filled my soul.

The hug of Gospel music pulled me close; now the hugs of the Gospel Choir embrace me each week. No longer a stranger. No longer outside the circle. I am an older brother to a hundred young people, a brother of a marvelous director, Sister Marvina "Cooky" Levy.

*Written in appreciation to  
Sister Marvina "Cooky" Levy,  
for her love and acceptance  
of all the people in the  
Biola University Gospel Choir and the  
Riverside Community College  
Gospel Singers.*

*Thank you for including us in  
the hug of Gospel music.*

*Thank you for embracing us  
in the Amazing Grace of the  
Gospel.*



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Peter James Silzer, PhD

*PeteSilzer@aol.com*

*Biola University Gospel Choir  
13800 Biola Avenue, La Mirada, CA 90639  
(562) 903-6000 x5834*

# The Gospel Hug

*How Gospel Music  
attracted and  
embraced me*

**Peter James Silzer, PhD**

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## The Gospel hug

Peter James Silzer

Everyone gets hugged at Gospel choir. Not just hugged, but Gospel hugged. A hug of music and a hug of soul. A strong brother to brother hug from Matt. A close to bone-crunching hug from Jenn. A timid, shy, maybe-I-shouldn't-hug-you hug from Naoko. And then there's Sister Levy. There's no escaping her almost-too-long hugs, the exchange-of-energy hugs that she gives each of us who surrenders to her motherly embrace. These are Gospel hugs.

No matter what happens on other nights, we gather on Wednesday nights to celebrate Gospel. And what a celebration! The Vietnamese community sends Kim, whose heart bubbles with a joy that brightens everyone near her. Larry brings his tambourine (and his Cuban heritage). There's Christina, from Laos; and Matthew, from Jamaica. Kenyan rhythms come with Linda and her brother Tendo. Gauthier brings a Belgian touch of humor; Sam and Nate, Korean strength. The other Nate grew up in Brazil, and Susie is Chinese, but raised in Argentina. Family names like Dejeu and Litovchenko add an Eastern European touch. And then there's me: a 50 year old white professor. What an odd, beautiful family.

We learn Gospel language. We learn some "attitude." Wednesday night becomes culture night. "That's whack, basses." "Sopranos, you're the bomb." "Altos, get ugly." And we "need the Lord." There are "issues," and "trials." We join Cooky's "Amen" and her "Aaaaaa-men."

We sing, "Lord, I hear of show'rs of blessings Thou art scatt'ring full and free...Let some

drops now fall on me, even me!" Line by line, Cooky leads us from our singular, self-centered lives to united songs of praise. The sopranos reach beyond us all and sing, "Even me!" Thirty altos and a dozen tenors blend notes so close to each other they buzz with energy. And, "give the basses some love," a dozen men rule the low notes. Five people from five different ethnic groups, "Visual Praise," enact the song in interpretive dance. Showers of blessing, mercy drops. Falling from heaven above to thirsty, desperate people pleading for refreshing rain.

Sister Levy asks: "Who doesn't have issues in their life? We ALL have issues. But GOD brings things into our lives for our good." Our song by Minister Cleo K. Joiner II reinforces Cooky's devotional thought: "For every trial, for every test, Jesus meant it for my good. For every tribulation and hour of distress, Jesus meant it for my good." "Signs of Praise" leads the audience in the chorus and people unite their hands and their hearts in expressing the truth of the song. Rachel and her sister Joy, Kim and Megan, Sarah and Marissa step out in front of the choir and sign the tag: "nail-pierced-hands intended for my good."

Strong and united, unadorned by harmony, the choir begins a Gospel anthem composed by Kevin Wayne Bumpers: "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof; the world and they that dwell therein." The theme is sung full-strength by a hundred voices. Then one-by-one "Tongues of Praise" proclaim the same message in each person's native language: French, Greek, Jamaican Creole, Japanese, Korean, Laotian, Luganda, Mandarin, Romanian, Russian, Spanish, Swahili, Vietnamese. The audience joins the crescendo, shouting in unison: "The **earth** is

the Lord's and the **fullness** thereof." Then, when the volume cannot rise anymore, we pause and watch in silence. Shalawnda represents those without voice, and we glimpse the beauty of American Sign Language. Bold, energetic movements silently cry out that they too want to acknowledge that the earth belongs to the Lord. The whole world worships as we share our various languages.

Assembled back as one, the choir cadences, "Great and marvelous are Thy works in all the earth!" Brother Dan provides the pulse on drums. Brother Clarence supports the choir on keyboard. The bass guitar, percussion, piano and sax join the festival music as Mike, Greg, Jerome and Jeff contribute their talents. Cooky lines the chorus, savoring each phrase. The choir chants the response. Suddenly, we are beyond the notes, above the rehearsal. The blessing descends from on high and warms our souls. We are no longer performing. We are not merely singing the right notes at the right time. We are transcending time and space in the presence of the Almighty God. "Sing, choir! Sing!" Cooky shouts. "Praise God!" We have been hugged by the Gospel. We are embraced by the message even as we sing it.

I didn't always understand Gospel music. I felt out of place the first time I heard the Gospel Choir sing. No sense of rhythm. Self-conscious. Not sure when to stand, sit, sway. I felt excluded, alone. This was not my kind of music. I am white, Mid-West, liturgical male, middle aged. I was raised on old Protestant hymns (some even in German). But something drew me to Gospel music. Another concert, a little further towards the front. Not as timid. Still awkward. Still terribly bound