

Robert Anderson Transcript of Interview in his Chicago home ~ January, 1993

[This interview was recorded on a tape deck in Mr. Anderson's living room. The quality is poor, but the spirit is alive and well. My questions are omitted below, leaving only Mr. Anderson's replies. -John Stiles]

I'm a gospel composer. I've been writing since 1939. I started out with the Roberta Martin singers, at the Ebenezer Baptist Church. I was brought to that church by my aunt, who was a member of Ebenezer. The woman was such a dynamic musician that she really inspired me. Of course, I didn't think I could play. She's the one who told me I could play, and of course, it became my livelihood.

The Frye and Martin Singers: we were organized by a young man by the name of Woody Wells. He wasn't no more than about 14 or 15 years old. I was about the same age. We was goin' around with Thomas Dorsey. Mr. Dorsey inspired a lot of people. He came from the blues into the church in writing gospel songs. He used to play for Bessie Smith. We were going around at that time selling our sheet music, single sheets for 5 cents a copy. We had a young boy by the name of Marcellus McKissy. He wasn't no more than about 8 years old. He was called the Boy Wonder.

We worked even during the time when we was in school. We toured all around: New York, Mississippi, California, Detroit, Cleveland, Connecticut, Philadelphia. Name it, we were there. We would wait until we got out of school to do our heavy traveling. Albertina Walker, I started with her. Mahaliah Jackson, I started playing for her. Most of the noted singers that have passed on, we worked with.

Are the young folks still interested? They're more so than ever! Music goes from one transition to another. We got the old gospel from the blues technique. When we started out, some of the churches wouldn't accept us because they said that we was playin' blues in the church. Now, it's in practically all of the different denominations.

What advice would I give a young musician? Now just like today, you got the gospel, and the jazz gospel; but it all conglomerates into the same. One cannot criticize the other. This contemporary gospel, you can't knock it. Jazz gospel, you can't knock it. To me, music is music; but the first thing, you have to be *spiritual-minded* to understand. It takes a person who is spiritual-minded. You have to believe in the Christ, you have to believe in the resurrection, you have to believe in the Holy Spirit, you believe in being born again. All of that has something to do with it. Regardless of the type of music.

That's the main issue. Today you have to be very careful in what you accept and what you reject. You have to be very careful. This is what Jesus was doing when he was teaching the gospel, and teaching how to love. And some people brings it in song. So that's what the gospel is. It's telling the story in song. It can be a slow song, or a jazzy one.

Like, you may like lemon cream pie, and you might like apple pie. I might like strawberry. So we all got our different tastes. We cannot say, "We dislike this and dislike

that..." because I can eat the lemon cream. I can eat the apple – *along* with my strawberry! You understand what I'm sayin'?

So, it's the way we accept these things. Just like with you. Now, I don't believe in discrimination. Human beings is human beings, regardless of creed or color. You understand? You know, this is where we make our mistakes. We get hung up on racial and on this and on that... we are all of God's children. Just like you have your different flowers. You don't have to have no one type of flower. In your yard you got variations of colors and flowers. This the way God made human beings. And uh, the thing of it is, if we don't have that love and concern toward one another, we're not going to be saved. You understand what I mean?

I ain't talking about your skin or who you are, or where you been or how much money you got. That don't mean nothin'! *Whatever* you got, you gonna leave it here. You gonna die and leave it *all*. Don't nothin' belong to us. And folks can actually get up and say many things that they wanna say, that they got this and they got this. Yeah you got it, but how long you gonna keep it? And somebody else could receive the same thing, and won't even think nothin' of it, and throw it out to the wolves. You understand what I'm sayin'?

So, these things don't mean anything. I'd rather have the love of God, and have his concern than anything in the world. All of this don't mean nothin'. I've sang in front of ambassadors and kings and queens. *That don't mean nothin'!* If they haven't received the word and received the Christ, they're still sounding brass. Do you understand what I'm saying?

I wrote a song about "Lord, Is It I?" You remember that when the Lord was giving the supper? He said that one of the disciples was going to betray him. And they were all askin' "Lord, is it I?" They wanted to know who it was that was going to betray him...

[At this point, Robert concludes the interview by singing a couple songs: "Lord, Is It I?" and "I Want To Walk And Talk With Jesus, Each And Every Day"]