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“WHEN WE SEND UP THE PRAISES”: RACE, IDENTITY, AND GOSPEL MUSIC IN AUGUSTA, GEORGIA

CARRIE A. ALLEN

James Brown, “Godfather of Soul” and social activist. The Swanee Quintet, a gospel group that in its heyday headlined at Harlem’s Apollo Theater. Springfield Baptist Church, one of the oldest independent African-American Baptist churches in the United States. Paine College, an academic institution founded in 1882 in an unusual interracial effort to provide higher education for African-American students. Several centuries of African-American life in Augusta, Georgia, have been imprinted by these people and institutions, all having achieved varying degrees of fame beyond the city limits of the eastern Georgia town. Yet other African-American institutions in Augusta have also left an indelible mark on the community but are only now beginning to attract wider attention. One such institution is Augusta’s local television program *Parade of Quartets*, a show that, since its inception as a radio program nearly sixty years ago, has broadcast African-American gospel music continuously.

In the late 1940s, two white men in Augusta’s radio business began to air a program consisting of live performances by local African-American gospel quartets, along with advertisements and announcements of interest to Augusta’s black community. The program, *Parade of Quartets*, quick-

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ly garnered a listening audience composed of both African-American and white Augustans. The program's inception, development, and impact on Augusta's black community constitutes a long and fascinating story, one that is inextricably bound to the city's tarnished history of race relations, the political plight of African Americans in the mid-twentieth century, the social significance of gospel music during the Jim Crow era, and the unique gospel music infrastructure of Augusta and neighboring South Carolina.

Black and White Photographs

Any discussion of Augusta's African-American community in the twentieth century must attempt an honest reckoning with the town's ugly history of racial tension. The historical record both reveals and reflects a city starkly divided along lines of color from the end of Reconstruction throughout much of the following century. Even now, in the early twenty-first century, the historiography of Augusta reflects a city that for much of its past has encompassed two separate worlds. For example, a collection of nostalgic, sepia-toned photographs documenting "old Augusta" was issued several years ago by Arcadia Publishing (Greene, Loehr, and Montgomery 2000). To a scholar of African-American history, the book is more notable for its omissions than for its content, as it contains almost no photographs of the African-American citizens, residences, businesses, parks, schools, churches, and cemeteries that existed mere blocks away from the elegant mansions and civic edifices pictured on the book's pages. Only a reader informed by other historical sources would know that the book documents only half of "old Augusta." In an ironic reflection of the reality of the black experience in Augusta, photographs documenting African-American life in the southern city appeared several years later in a separate "Black America Series," also published by Arcadia (Joiner and Smith 2004). The separate-but-equal photograph collections are merely emblematic of the approach demonstrated by much of the existing historiography of Augusta. Historical sources that simultaneously (if inadvertently) documented Augusta's two worlds did so with even more uncomfortable results: as recently as 1966, the *Augusta Chronicle* confined news of interest to the African-American community to the "colored page" (Terrell 1977, 33).

Such historiography simultaneously describes and codifies the social paradigm operative in the city from antebellum years until the late twentieth century: for all practical purposes, there have been two Augustas. A historian commenting on so-called African-American life in Augusta is faced with a dilemma: Will the methodology and presentation of data

merely describe Augusta's bifurcated social schema? Or will the project, perhaps unwittingly, perpetuate the city's racial divide? In this article, I speak consistently of what I perceive to be a discrete African-American community in Augusta in the twentieth century. In doing so, I hazard the risk of reinscribing the divide in order to describe it, with the hope that reader and writer alike will reflect on their own roles in perpetuating social paradigms similar to that operative in Augusta for too much of its history.

Reconstruction to 1950s: Augusta's Great Divide

Despite marginalization in reality and by history, African-American life in early twentieth-century Augusta blossomed. Records from the first half of the century list many black doctors, pharmacists, dentists, lawyers, teachers, ministers, and business owners active in Augusta. Photographs and other records of the same era document the presence of important institutions such as churches, schools, mortuaries, nursing homes, and grocery stores in the African-American community. Additionally, black musicians such as the Swanee Quintet and James Brown, places of entertainment such as the Lenox Theater, and community-improvement initiatives such as benevolent associations, orphanages, a YMCA, women's clubs, Paine College, and a local NAACP chapter flourished in the first half of the century.

This astounding flowering of Augusta's African-American community in the early part of the twentieth century occurred in the context of social and political frustrations similar to those experienced by much of the black population across the southeast. In Augusta, as elsewhere in the southern United States, the African-American community's access to the political process and to educational and economic opportunities was severely limited by both legalized and de facto segregation. By the early 1950s, Augusta's black constituency was still having to voice concerns over the lack of basic government services such as "playgrounds, schools, and paved streets with lights"—amenities regularly supplied to white neighborhoods (Cobb 1975, 66). Around mid-century, lynchings were not unheard of in the area. The median African-American income in Augusta in 1949 was only 44.4% of the median white income; only 2.5% of blacks over age twenty-five were high school graduates; and 75% of Augusta's African-American population were "crowded into an area in southeast Augusta where 69% of the dwellings were dilapidated" (Cobb 1975, 99). While the 1954 Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education* "officially" ended the era of legalized segregation in public schools, in reality it effected only minimal change in the educational opportunities for

Augusta's African-American youth, many of whom continued to face both personal and institutional efforts on the part of some white citizens to impede integration of the schools (104–105). Frustrated by the impotency of its mostly theoretical political agency, the black community in 1950s Augusta increasingly began to rely on protests and demonstrations. However, the few victories won by these means quickly proved to be only minimally effective. The limited concessions that were strategically permitted by Augusta's white businessmen, who were eager to vaunt the city's "progressiveness" to potential investors, ultimately did little to improve the economic and social situation of the city's African-American community. Black political activism and protests had tapered off by the end of the 1950s (76).

It was into this milieu of racial tension and social frustration that the *Parade of Quartets* emerged. Conceived sometime in the late 1940s (Norton 2004) by Steve Manderson, a white advertising account executive at Augusta's WJBF-AM (580), the program broadcast live performances by local African-American gospel quartets for about two hours each Sunday morning (Norton 2004). Manderson apparently had an ear for what local listeners would enjoy and convinced WJBF's owner, white businessman J. B. Fuqua, that the show would be successful. In the early 1950s, WJBF-AM made the transition from radio to television. With its first broadcast on April 17, 1955 (Rhodes 2005), *Parade of Quartets* became one of the young television station's earliest programs. Fuqua, a fan of gospel music who was also interested in promoting racial equality during the turbulent 1950s, declared that while most Southern media executives were "generally too chicken to do something like that, I felt that it was something that I could do and directly make a difference" (Norton 2004). According to his later reminiscences, both white and black listeners soon came to enjoy the program (Norton 2004).

In its early years, the television program consisted of performances by African-American male gospel quartets, followed by each group's brief mention of its commercial sponsors. According to one account of the show's early years, "each group had its sponsors to pay for their time on the air. This allowed many businesses that normally could not get on television, an opportunity to advertise their products and services. Also, with its vast viewing audience, many businesses found the program to be an excellent vehicle to reach the African-American community" ("History" n.d.). Additionally, the program included announcements of "benefits for [black] churches and groups to raise money for needed projects" in the local area ("History" n.d.).¹ From its roots, then, the program was inextricably linked to the fabric of African-American community life and served

1. The program's current producer and cohost, Karlton Howard (2007), recently indicat-

a more complex social function than that of mere entertainment or even religious ritual. Although its content centered on black gospel music and community life, the program did not feature an African-American cohost until 1970 (Cooper and Wynn 2005). Steve Manderson, the show's white originator, was the sole host during its first few decades.

Although it may surprise contemporary readers to discover that the Augusta of the 1950s could have enough African-American gospel quartets to fill two hours of airtime each week, the popularity of quartet singing was a national phenomenon at the time. Like many towns across America in the 1950s, Augusta and the surrounding areas boasted dozens of homegrown gospel quartets. Local groups such as the Abraham Brothers, Veteran Harmonizers, Gospel Echo Soul Stirrers, and the Swanee Quintet appeared frequently on the *Parade of Quartets* during the program's early years ("History" n.d.). Likewise, the surge in the commercial availability of gospel music through radio broadcasts and record albums became a nationwide phenomenon following World War II.

The appearance of an African-American gospel program on white-owned WJBF-AM in Augusta in the 1940s was part of a broader trend in American mass media, contrary to Fuqua's assertion that most Southern media executives were afraid to program such music. Immediately following World War II, "radio had become the means through which small-town America could hear gospel on any Sunday and, in most cases, either before seven o'clock in the morning or after ten o'clock at night on weekdays, . . . stations from New York to Tennessee featured the gospel hour. . . . [As of the mid-1940s], none of these stations were African American-owned" (Boyer 2000, 52). If the *Parade of Quartets* is remarkable in its longevity, its roots lay in fairly common developments in the national media of the late 1940s.

Separate Drinking Fountains: The Social Significance of Gospel Quartets

Why quartets at all? Why did America experience such an astounding proliferation of this particular type of African-American male ensemble beginning a century ago and lasting in some areas such as eastern Georgia and South Carolina to the present? One answer lies in the institutionalized repression for much of the twentieth century of the African-American male's opportunities for economic and social advancement—

ed that the FCC initially designated *Parade of Quartets* a public service project for the state of Georgia. The relationship between the government and the show in its early years remains to be explored.

repression that was sanctioned by law and reinforced by media stereotypes. Decades prior to the beginning of the quartet movement in the late nineteenth century, the American mass media had begun its long-standing tradition of depicting black men as lazy buffoons, bumbling social climbers, or rapacious villains. Derogatory stereotypes were ubiquitous in films, variety shows, song lyrics, visual images, and advertisements, implying harmless idiocy at best and predatory monstrosity at worst. These popular conceptions of African-American masculinity both shaped and reflected the ideology of legalized segregation and white elitism. Largely confined to a position of minimal social power, many black men in early and mid-twentieth-century America were consistently denied the chance to assert their masculinity through productive citizenship and economic achievement.

The quartet phenomenon emerged in part as an opportunity for African-American males to invert these destructive media stereotypes and the debilitating social structures those stereotypes upheld. Black gospel quartet members, appearing in public with impeccable hairstyles, matching suits, polished shoes, and choreographed motions, performed an art form honed to perfection by hours of practice. Quartets "presented themselves not only as upstanding and talented members of the community, but as a group of African-American men who could and did serve as role models for other African-American men" (Boyer 2000, 93). With their precision, order, discipline, and panache, quartet members powerfully negated media stereotypes and social expectations of inferiority, laziness, and boorishness. Six days out of the week, a quartet singer may have been called "boy," but onstage at a concert, there was no doubt about his status as a man. In a striking inversion of the weekday social pyramid, the quartet singer assumed in live performance a position of ritual power, implicitly charged with the duty of mediating the divine presence (not to mention a good time) to an audience eager to experience transcendence of earthly trials. For much of the twentieth century, society denied black men the chance to participate in mainstream American constructions of masculinity; in the margins, therefore, many young African-American males participated in self-constructed masculinity through the gospel quartet.

Since each individual quartet singer also functioned in relationship to other group members, the quartet schema facilitated the simultaneous achievement of both group and individual identity. One such marker of group identity was the personalized "theme song" with which many quartets began their concerts. Formal studio portraits of quartets also imprinted the group's identity on the public. In addition, group identity was articulated by quartet members in performance through frequent ref-

erences to the geographical area that the group claimed as home. Quartet singers' assertion of masculine identity and social power was channeled intensely not only in live performance but also through the media of recordings and radio. Beginning to break into the mass-music industry in the 1930s, these groups paved the way for later generations of secular and sacred ensembles structured on the quartet ethos. For quartet members, as for so many others participants over the centuries, the medium of African-American sacred song served to invert social reality and construct identities of personal and group empowerment.

Post-1950s: Augusta's Shifting Paradigms

During the two decades following the inception of *Parade of Quartets*, Augusta's African-American citizens experienced little progress toward achieving social and economic equality. In May 1970, racial tensions that had simmered under the surface in the city for many years exploded into a fatal riot, a landmark event that ultimately became a catalyst for social and political change in Augusta. One indication of the transformation of Augusta's social climate during this era was that the *Parade of Quartets* hired its first black cohost the very same year as the race riot. The choice, Henry Howard, was the lead singer and manager of the Spirits of Harmony, a gospel quartet that had frequently performed on the program since the show's early days ("History" n.d.). Over the next thirty years, Howard's varying involvement as the program's host (1970–1982) and producer/cohost (1982–2005) helped shape the *Parade of Quartets* into a blend of community news, religious ritual, and gospel music performance.

In a sense, Howard's life also embodied the same blend of politics, gospel music, and religious expression that came to characterize the *Parade of Quartets* during his tenure with the show. In 1985, fifteen years after becoming the program's cohost (and no doubt assisted by the public exposure inherent in the position), Howard embarked on a twenty-year political career that took him from the Augusta–Richmond County Board of Commissioners to the Georgia State Legislature. During his time in office, he amassed political support and personal respect from Augusta's constituency as well as from his fellow public servants. The political impact of Howard's tenure with the *Parade of Quartets* is summarized in the comments of a local African-American politician of a younger generation. Moses Todd, a Richmond County–Augusta commissioner from 1992 to 1998, reflected a few days after Howard's death in 2005: "If you're running for political office at the time that I was working for other folks in the early '80s and you didn't go on the *Parade of Quartets*

on Sundays, forget about winning. . . . [W]hen you go on the *Parade of Quartets*, . . . it meant you had Henry's blessings if he interviewed you or gave you an opportunity to say a few words or put your commercial on the *Parade of Quartets*. It was very important to have his backing" (Wynn 2005).

During his successful career in politics, Howard continued to play an active role in Augusta's gospel music community. He was known as a knowledgeable and influential gospel music promoter, frequently "booking national African-American gospel acts into Bell Auditorium and the Augusta-Richmond County Civic Center" (Rhodes 2005). At the time of his death in 2005, he was still performing with the Spirits of Harmony, with whom he had recorded a few albums (Rhodes 2005). The ways in which Augusta has memorialized Howard give crucial clues about his identity as a prominent member of the area's gospel music community: Several days after his death in early October of 2005, the *Augusta Chronicle* ran an article on Howard titled "Gospel Music Pioneer Is Remembered" (2005). A radio tribute to Howard by a local gospel music deejay included the playing of "Jesus Will Fix It," known to be one of Howard's favorite gospel songs. The deejay, Garfield Turner, noted Howard's significance to gospel music in Augusta: "Henry was the only promoter (of gospel music) here in Augusta for years. . . . [J]ust about every old seasoned group that's been through Augusta came through Henry" (Cooper and Wynn 2005). A commemorative compact disc of Howard's gospel recordings, titled *The Songs Henry Sang*, was issued in the months following his death, and made available for purchase through the *Parade of Quartets* website.

In addition to participating in local political and musical activities, Howard also maintained a consistent and public relationship with his church during his tenure with the television program. For sixty years, he was a member and deacon at the Green Grove Missionary Baptist Church (Rhodes 2005); at varying times, he was a trustee, choir member, and participant in activities such as the building fund ("History" n.d.). At Howard's funeral in October 2005, several public figures commented on the integration of his religious convictions and his professional activities: "[H]e would take it [legislative concerns] to the Lord in prayer," political aide Jack Usry said (Edwards 2005). Willie Mays, Interim Mayor of Augusta at the time of Howard's death in October 2005, said that "Mr. Howard took Jesus with him everywhere he went" (quoted in Edwards 2005).

Howard's political influence, continued enthusiasm for gospel music, and personal religious convictions ultimately shaped the *Parade of Quartets* into a multifunctional program that consistently addressed those same three components of Augusta's African-American community life.

Howard's specific "improvements [to the show] included adding the morning's prayer and becoming more aggressive in promoting minority businesses and gospel music in general . . . [along with] a community service segment with guests coming in to be interviewed . . . called 'Past, Present, Future'" ("History" n.d.). By the early 1990s, the program featured several other weekly components in addition to Howard's innovations. The staple contents of the *Parade of Quartets* since that time have been African-American gospel music performances (frequently by male quartets but also by mixed groups, soloists, instrumentalists, and choirs of varying local, regional, or national prominence); announcements of community and church events of interest to Augusta's black community; interviews with local, regional, and even national community leaders and politicians; and weekly Sunday School lessons, consisting of Bible exposition by a local minister wearing pastoral robes and standing in front of a studio set depicting a stained-glass window. A casual glance at the names of some of the political and musical personalities that have appeared on the show (thanks to Howard's political and musical clout) indicates the surprising manner in which this unassuming local television program managed to expand its circles of influence. Guests have included the Reverends Jesse L. Jackson and Al Sharpton, Georgia governor Roy Barnes, the Mighty Clouds of Joy, Shirley Caesar, James Brown, the Dixie Hummingbirds, and the Reverend Al Green (Rhodes 2005).

After he stopped hosting the show in 1982, Howard continued his association with the program as its executive producer, maintaining and refining its triple focus of music, politics, and religion until his death. Howard's multifaceted contribution to Augusta's African-American community was captured by a resolution approved by the Georgia House of Representatives at the time of his death, describing Howard as "a gospel music promoter, one of the founders of the Spirits of Harmony gospel quartet, and the executive producer of the television show, *Parade of Quartets*, which is in its fifty-first year" (House Resolution 1241, Georgia House of Representatives, October 2005).

African-American History Month on the Parade of Quartets

An analysis of an episode of *Parade of Quartets* from February 2, 1989, demonstrates the show's multifunctional identity that owed so much to Howard's guidance (*Parade of Quartets* 1989–1996). This episode, which focuses on the events and ethos of Black History Month in the Augusta area, indicates the show's simultaneous engagement with political issues relevant to the local African-American community along with elements of Protestant Christian ritual. This simultaneity of function is exemplified

by the identity of the guests interviewed and by the content of their remarks, the content of song texts, the role of youth, and the types of community events advertised.

In a demonstration of the marriage between black politics and religion in Augusta, Howard, acting as cohost (and labeled on-screen as "Representative Henry Howard of the 121st District"), interviews two local African-American ministers during the show's "Past, Present, and Future" segment.² Howard queries the ministers about the involvement of religious leaders in a community's political life. Both the Reverend Johnny Bussey and the Reverend Kenneth Martin firmly express a belief that African-American politics and religious conviction are inextricably intertwined. Bussey replies to "Brother Howard" that "the Lord has brought us a long way;" his subsequent remarks imply that the involvement of the church in the political process has been responsible for the achievement of some measure of social equity for the black community. The Reverend Martin expresses the shared sentiment more explicitly: "Our whole background is based on politics, and in the African-American community, the church itself is the foundation and everything else moves out from there, ever since the beginning of African-American society as we know it." Both ministers cite specific portions of Scripture as theological support for the engagement of the church with the political process, with Bussey mentioning Isaiah 9:6 ("and the government shall be on His shoulders") and Martin referring to Jesus' death and the interactions of Elijah and King Ahab to demonstrate that significant elements of the Judeo-Christian drama, at least as portrayed in the Bible, have often unfolded on a political stage. Similarly, both ministers discuss the imperative to meet the needs of the "whole" person by ministering to both spiritual and physical concerns. In a vivid demonstration of the concepts just discussed, the interview concludes with an announcement for a rally on the consolidation of certain aspects of local (Augusta) and county (Richmond County) government and how it will affect "us." Significantly, the rally was scheduled to occur at Reverend Martin's Antioch Baptist Church on the same evening that the *Parade of Quartets* was broadcast.

Later in the program, during a feature entitled the "Parade of Quartets Educational Awareness Segment," cohost Helen Blocker Ware interviews J. Philip Waring, chair of the African-American History Committee of Augusta, regarding the significance of Black History Month and some of

2. The weekly segment is typically dedicated to the discussion of community, legal, and political issues; a sample of topics discussed ranges from updates about local and state legislation (concerning issues such as sex education) to the endorsement of community groups intent on elevating the housing and educational standards of Augusta's poor community.

the specific ways that it will be celebrated in the Augusta area. When asked about what people ought to know about the “roots” of African-American history in Augusta and Richmond County, Waring responds, “[W]e’ve served in wars, built, tilled, and [started] businesses and institutions [that have contributing to building] Augusta into [a Georgia city] that is just behind Atlanta.” During the interview, Waring mentions a variety of local events planned for Black History Month, including those sponsored by local churches and civic groups, as well as Paine College, the University of South Carolina at Aiken, and Augusta College. He also names several African-American Augustan ministers and professors (at Paine College) who are active in what he describes as a “social movement.”³

A second marker of African-American social, religious, and political identity in this particular episode can be discerned in the texts of the songs performed. A children’s choir from the Minnie Palmore Institute performs an arrangement of the spiritual “No More Weepin’ and A-Wailin’ (Soon I Will Be Done with the Troubles of the World),” providing an aural signifier of a grievous past. Their second selection, the well-known patriotic song “This Is My Country,” stands in stark and ironic contrast to the era evoked by the spiritual, celebrating as it does the possibilities that current black youth have for fuller participation in American society. Later in the program, a young boy from the learning center sings and performs choreography to a song titled “I Love the Skin I’m In.” Lyrics such as “Black is a fact—there is no taking it back” and “if you look at me funny, I’ll look at you funny too” celebrate pride in African-American identity and heritage. When the young boy finishes singing, cohost (and Henry Howard’s son) Karlton Howard pats him on the shoulder affirmingly, repeats the song’s title, and says, “So do I.”

More than in any other *Parade of Quartets* episode that I have screened, young African Americans play a particularly prominent role in this episode. Notably, cohosts treat the youthful guests as valued contributors to both the television program and to black communal life and identity. The Minnie Palmore Learning Institute choir, appearing in its annual performance on the program, features at least twenty children who appear to be four to five years old dressed in “church” clothes, with boys wearing suits and ties and girls wearing medium-length dresses and elaborate hairstyles. In their initial appearance, the children are asked by cohost Mary Adams to introduce themselves, and each one speaks his or her name into the microphone being passed around. Later in the show, two

3. Waring’s father, caterer John P. Waring, was among the four African-American men who funded the construction and operation of Augusta’s Lenox Theater in the early 1920s (Lombardo 2006).

young boys from the institute recite memorized dialogues that celebrate (and partially quote) famous speeches by African-American civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr., and the Reverend Jesse Jackson. Cohost Adams verbally affirms the boys' effort several times with remarks such as "you'll be another Martin and you'll be the next President . . . anything can happen." In another example of the show's prioritization of the younger generation, twelve-year-old Atiya Kirkland of Garfield, Georgia (not affiliated with the Minnie Palmore Learning Institute), performs a solo; host Karlton Howard spends several moments talking with her about her musical and religious experiences.

Last, the program's role as an organ of communication for Augusta's African-American community is highlighted by the announcement of a wide variety of impending community events. Examples of events announced include gospel programs, anniversary programs, revival services, and numerous church and civic events that will celebrate Black History Month; many of these events include a combination of stage drama, musical performance, and speeches. Topics for some of these commemorative and celebratory events include "Black Folktales and Blacks Theology" and "Women in Civil Rights." Current host and producer Karlton Howard (2007) recently verified the program's continuing status as a sort of community message board, stating that "people watch it to find out what's going on . . . at the Black Museum, at Paine College."

Strands of the Web:

Locating the Show in the Matrix of the Local Gospel Music Scene

In one sense, the *Parade of Quartets* can be seen as part of Augusta's long tradition of solidifying African-American community life through the maintenance of separate, independent media outlets (e.g., black newspapers abounded in the area throughout much of the previous two centuries) (Terrell 1977). On the other hand, the program's occasional inclusion of white performers⁴ suggests that commonly held religious or musical values may transcend old barriers in Augusta. Additionally, at least some members of Augusta's white community grew up watching and enjoying the show (Young 2007).

Speaking more globally, however, the program is something of an anomaly. It represents an anachronistic continuation of a media tradition that died out in other places long ago. The *Parade of Quartets* seems to be the longest-running gospel music television program in the United States

4. Currently, Flo Carter and her family of Beech Island, South Carolina, perform on *Parade of Quartets* the first Sunday of each month (Rhodes 2007).

("History" n.d.; Rhodes 2003; Norton 2004; "Henry Howard's Obituary" 2005). The program's success and longevity can best be comprehended by locating the show within a gospel music infrastructure that encompasses eastern Georgia and western South Carolina. Its role in a larger gospel music community may explain why it has outlasted other similar gospel music programs that may not have had the benefit of participation in such an infrastructure. Conceptualizing the *Parade of Quartets* as one of several strands in a unique social fabric helps explain its endurance and continued relevance to Augusta's African-American community.

One of the most vibrant components of Augusta's gospel music infrastructure is the Swanee Quintet, an internationally known quartet⁵ whose countless appearances on the *Parade of Quartets*, beginning with the show's days on the radio, have doubtless contributed to the program's popularity and longevity. While the vast majority of Augusta's quartets of the 1940s and 1950s remained active at only the local and regional level, the Swanee Quintet, founded in Augusta in 1939 (Cox 2005), eventually achieved national fame. By the 1960s, the group was enjoying hit recordings and a tour schedule that included venues such as Madison Square Garden, Carnegie Hall, and the Apollo Theater, along with collaboration with artists such as James Brown. Unlike many gospel groups who achieved national popularity and distanced themselves from their place of origin, "the Swanee Quintet kept Augusta . . . as their home base, . . . consciously cultivat[ing] the rural sound of early quartets" (Boyer 2000, 178). Also unlike many renowned gospel groups who flourished during the golden decades of quartet singing, the Swanee Quintet remains a viable performing ensemble, continuing to release albums and perform at concerts, including an appearance at Augusta's funeral ceremony for James Brown. The group attracted a crowd of roughly two thousand to their most recent annual anniversary concert in Bell Auditorium in Augusta in 2006 (Norton 2006)—a tribute to the group's ability to maintain their "home base." Part of maintaining this home base has included frequent performances on the *Parade of Quartets* over nearly six decades.

The group's continued devotion to their hometown has included frequent concerts in the Bell Auditorium and performances at local charity events such as James Brown's annual Thanksgiving turkey give-away. Such participation in Augusta's communal life has not gone unnoticed by

5. The Swanee Quintet, although featuring more than four singers, is still designated a "quartet" by both fans and scholars alike, thanks to the group's use of the voice stratification, repertoire, and performance practice common to male ensembles with only four voices. Examples of other well-known gospel quartets that frequently featured more than four singers include the Fairfield Four and the Soul Stirrers.

the management of the *Parade of Quartets*. As recently as 2005, Henry Howard told the *Augusta Chronicle* that despite the group's acclaim on the national level, the Swanees "always recognized Augusta as home, . . . they never claimed Atlanta like other groups did" (Cox 2005). Both Henry Howard and his son Karlton Howard often attended the Swanee Quintet's annual anniversary concerts in Augusta, perpetuating the relationship between the group and the television program (Cox 2005).

Another factor in the show's sustained success seems to have been the presence and support of Pyramid Music, an Augusta record store owned since 1976 by Robert "Flash" Gordon, a longtime music promoter and record executive (who incidentally, also worked with James Brown in earlier decades). Gordon, selected by Howard as a cohost of the *Parade of Quartets* in 2001 (Cooper and Wynn 2005), has gradually attained a degree of prominence in Augusta's civic and musical life. In fact, in 2006, Gordon was hired as the new manager of Augusta's James Brown Arena (Boron 2006). In addition to the visibility and political clout that his presence lends to the *Parade of Quartets*, his business venture, Pyramid Music, supports gospel music in the area by selling concert tickets, posting advertisements for local gospel singings, and stocking and selling recordings produced by local, regional, and national gospel artists. In a commercial market dominated by chain music stores, Pyramid Music has managed for more than three decades to maintain a steady consumer base in Augusta by catering to niche market interests, including purchasers of gospel music. Noura Gordon, one of Pyramid's managers and daughter of Robert Gordon, attributed the store's success to its ability to "provide for the African-American community and sell a lot of the . . . gospel [and other genres] that a lot of other stores don't get" (quote in Uhles 2000). She commented that Pyramid carried "the largest gospel selection in town," even noting that "it's amazing how well gospel is selling" (quoted in Gallagher 2003).

A third reason for the show's continued relevance to the political and social concerns of African-American Augustans was the involvement of internationally known performer and political activist James Brown, an Augusta native and longtime acquaintance of Henry Howard. Through at least the late 1990s, Brown, also an ordained minister, appeared on the *Parade of Quartets* to discuss social issues, perform gospel songs, and offer inspirational commentary. He became involved in the public dialogue on the Augusta race riots in May 1970 via local radio appearances—only one example of his long-standing concern with the political and social welfare of city's African-American community (Cobb 1975, 211). Brown's awareness of the role he played in Augusta's race relations is clear from a May 16, 1993, appearance on the *Parade of Quartets* (1989–1996). During an

interview, Brown and Howard reminisce about shared boyhood experiences in Augusta. The two men joke about various teachers and classmates at the segregated elementary school they both attended, entertainment they viewed at the (all-black) Lenox Theater, and Brown's days as a juvenile delinquent in Augusta. Brown also discusses his later conversion to Christianity (at the time of the 1993 interview, he appears to have been a minister at a church not far from Augusta, possibly in South Carolina). Additionally, Brown speaks of his pride in his part in the civil-rights movement (he references his involvement in the public dialogue following the 1970 riot) and in the continued struggle for social equality. He makes particular mention of his recent appearances in Atlanta to "encourage the poor." When speaking of his hometown, Brown reaffirms his belief in Augusta's wealth of native musical talent, along with his desire to see the people of Augusta elevate themselves above standard economic conditions and inadequate educational opportunities. During the same program, Brown performs a soul-inflected gospel song concerning earthly troubles and the singer's wistful longing to "roll around in heaven all day" like the lazy sun, free of worldly trials. Brown closes the program with a performance with another guest, the Reverend Joe Simon, of "I'll Go with Him All the Way"; near the end of the performance, host Henry Howard approaches the two singers and begins to sing with them.

Brown's impact on Augusta's gospel scene and on its African-American community, reflected in these and other appearances on the *Parade of Quartets*, is confirmed in the local gospel music community's recognition of his musical achievements and charitable contributions. In 1999, the Northeast Augusta chapter of the Gospel Music Association of America sponsored a beautification project of Brown's old neighborhood. The group claimed that "the reason we chose [James Brown Boulevard] . . . is that a lot of things James Brown has done have gone unnoticed. Not by the Lord, and not by us" (Norton 1999). As of 2003, Brown still had business interests in Augusta's WKIM-AM, which at the time played gospel music, among other genres (Cox 2003). Flo Carter, a longtime performer on the *Parade of Quartets*, reflected on Brown's death by recalling that he "frequently watched the *Parade of Quartets* TV show that airs on WJBF on Sunday mornings that I and my family sing on, and he came to sing on the show quite a few times. The host, Henry Howard, thought the world of him" (Rhodes 2006).

Clearly, the *Parade of Quartets* thrives within a unique network of personalities and institutions that support and enrich several dimensions of African-American life in Augusta, including that of musical performance, religious experience, and political advocacy. Although Henry Howard

died in October 2005, leaving the executive direction of the *Parade of Quartets* to his son, the program has continued its reputation for performing multiple functions for its viewers, as evidenced by its support for a political event of national significance just last year. On August 14 and 15, 2006, the National Dialogue and Revival for Social Justice in the African-American Church Georgia 2006, sponsored by the National Action Network, was held at the Good Shepherd Baptist Church in Augusta. Participants included the Reverend Jesse L. Jackson, the Reverend Al Sharpton, Congresswoman Cynthia McKinney of Georgia's 4th District, Atlanta mayor Shirley Franklin, members of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and ministers and university professors from across America. The conference addressed "pressing issues in the African-American Community such as health, employment, increased high school drop outs, high rate of incarceration, [and] voter apathy" ("Recent Guests, National Dialogue" n.d.). Participants in the dialogue also appeared on the *Parade of Quartets* during their time in Augusta, confirming the vibrant power of the program's voice in Augusta. As the *Parade of Quartets* moves into the twenty-first century, it continues to demonstrate the same ability to remain politically and musically relevant that has characterized it for well over fifty years.

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