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Keeping faith in the making of music

By M. Gosia Bawolska , *Varsity Staff*

They have sung with Roberta Flack, Peabo Bryson, and Eric Neville. When someone was needed to liven up the Audit Bureau of Circulation's annual conference, they were the ones who did it. This group knows what the inside of '100 Huntley Street' looks like. And they have wowed the crowds at Massey Hall.



Er, who are they again? Allow me to give you a hint: if you pass by the St. Thomas Aquinas Chapel (just off St. George Street) on any given Friday evening, you will hear them hard at work, practising every song verse until it is perfect. Still confused?

Then consider yourself introduced to the University of Toronto Gospel Choir. Still don't know them? Perhaps check where you're sitting as you read this.

"We're sort of known in the city, but we're not known [almost at all] on campus," confirms choir member Thandi Francis.

And it is not just the City of Toronto that has discovered U of T's 'secret' choir.

"Last year the choir went to Barbados," said Cathryn-Jane Weirs, amid much laughter from her fellow-singers. "It was for Gospel Fest '96."

"It was really good, the choir got a lot of international recognition [which also reflected on to] U of T," she adds.

The choir has 55 dedicated members in total. On the coldest evening in Toronto's history, for example, 43 showed up for practice. And it's not because the president of the choir executive will yell at them if they don't. If you walk in on their rehearsals, you will see that all the choir members genuinely enjoy what they do. I have never had so many people smile at me, even while trying to ignore the camera in my hands.

"One of the main reasons, I think, [why] a lot of people initially [joined the choir] was the social [aspect], especially since St. George campus can be very alienating," said Ava Nelson, another choir member. "[The choir] provided a group of people that met each week at a home base, and did a very fun thing, which is lift up the name of the Lord in song."

The choir was founded in early 1995 when the African-Canadian Students Association (ACSA) formed a committee to start a gospel choir. The troupe gave its first concert seven weeks later. By April 1996 the University of Toronto Gospel Choir became a fully independent campus organization. The lack of a permanent rehearsal venue, and resulting high membership fees, was solved by Newman Centre director Father Rosica, who offered the chapel near the centre to the choir.

It would be reasonable to assume that music students would make up the bulk of the singers, but Thandi explains that members come from all academic disciplines.

"We have everyone, from engineering, to chemistry, to nursing."

The one notable music student is Lisa Toussaint, the choir's popular, energetic director, who is taking a break from university this year but will return to her studies next fall. The choice as to whether she can return to the choir, however, seems to be a question out of her hands.

"She's not allowed to leave. She's cool," said various members of the choir.

"One of the things that we would like to do is cater to the students and to encourage them to come to our events and our concerts," says Derek Quashie. "[There] is a tendency to believe that gospel is not fun, that gospel is not exciting, that gospel is not young, and that it is not vibrant. It's one of the things that we want to emphasize-that it is and can be exciting."

The choir plans to increase its presence on campus by holding free concerts

during the day in popular venues such as Sidney Smith Hall. They hope that students will walk by, hear the choir singing, and stop to listen.

The biggest event of the year for the Gospel Choir is the Spring Concert.

"This is a concert that we host at Convocation Hall," said Thandi, "and we invite other colleges and choirs to sing with us."

Making their presence heard on campus will hopefully lead to their second goal, because at this year's concert they will be trying something new.

"We'd like to raise money to donate to the annual fund to create a scholarship for incoming students," Thandi explains. "The concert raises a considerable amount of money and we want to do something productive with that."

But there are problems. Even at the student rate, Convocation Hall is very expensive to rent, and so far the choir has not been able to persuade Hart House to sell Spring Concert tickets on its behalf. They hope that an increased profile might give them enough student support to convince Hart House and the 'powers that rent Convocation Hall' to give them a break.

Things are not bleak all over, however.

"There are lots of pre-conceived notions about what gospel is," says Cathryn-Jane, "and then people come and hear us and a lot of [them comment] what great energy we have, and we're having a great time, and we're good friends, and we have a real sense of faith and community."

She just wishes that the student community was little more aware of the Gospel Choir's existence.

The Choir will be appearing today at Sid Smith at 1 p.m. as part of the celebration of Christian Awareness Week. If you miss hearing them there, you can call the Gospel hotline at 763-9031.

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