

A giant looks back

In the beginning, there was Dorsey

ALL IT TOOK to find Thomas A. Dorsey was a telephone call to Pilgrim Baptist Church, 3301 S. Indiana Av. Was the composer of "Precious Lord, Take My Hand" and "inventor" of gospel music still directing the choir he had started in 1932? The answer came short and sweet: "He will be until he goes to heaven."

That's the best thing about being in Chicago when you write about gospel music. Most of the people who made it happen are right here.

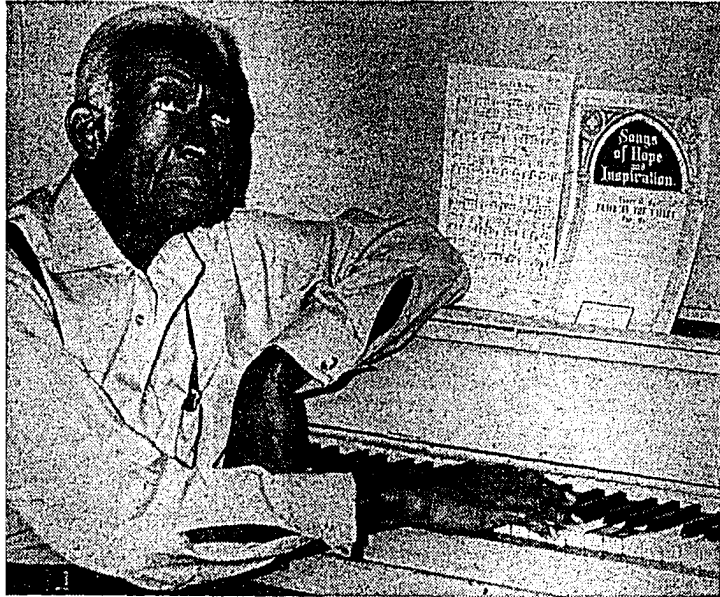
Dorsey is not writing music any more, but at 77 he is alert, intelligent, and willing to reminisce. Our appointment was sandwiched between a visiting Harvard scholar doing a dissertation and a BBC television team looking for authentic expression of black culture.

In the days when he was known as "Georgia Tom," Dorsey was Ma Rainey's pianist. The legendary singer and teacher of Bessie Smith and enough others to earn her the title of "mother of blues singers" kept Dorsey and his four-piece band working from 1923 to 1928. In the years before and after, he held a variety of jobs in show business. But he says his interest in gospel songs started around 1921, when he attended a National Baptist Convention here. "The man singing looked like he was having such a good time at it, and when they passed the collection plate, they took up hundreds of dollars," he recalled.

Even before he quit playing and arranging secular music, Dorsey wrote gospel tunes. "I wanted to get the feeling and the moans and the blues into the songs. Before that, they would sing 'Spirit-tu-al-fellow-ship-of-the-Jordan land.' Jubilee songs. Wasn't nothing to them. But then I turned those blues moans on, modified some of the stuff from way back in the jazz era, bashed it up and smoothed it in. It had that beat, that rhythm. And people were wild about it.

But preachers and choir directors devoted to the conventional anthems and spiritual arrangements were not wild. "You can't sing no gospel in here," they would tell me. You got only to preach the gospel. But I'd tell 'em 'gospel means good news.

"'Good news, that's what's goin' to save your people,' I'd say. 'They'll come in where they feel the news is good, not where the news is not good.' When Dorsey couldn't convince the church staffs, he'd go to the people, selling single sheets door-to-door. "I



Tribune Photo by Ray Gora

Dorsey: "I advertise for God."

got a friend in Morgan Park who knew an engraver and had a press; we used to sell the music for a time.

"'Precious Lord' came along in 1932, after the composer was dealt a double blow by the deaths of his wife and baby. With the aid of Sallie Martin, whose emotion-packed singing style made her his most persuasive salesperson, he began to open up the nationwide market, visiting conventions, setting up distribution centers for his publishing house.

The same year he wrote "'Precious Lord,'" he founded the National Convention of Gospel Choirs and Choruses. Nearly all of the singers who made names in gospel's early years — Clara Ward, Mahalia Jackson, Roberta Martin — were helped by him.

Dorsey has been pleased by the international acclaim of "Precious Lord" and particularly enjoys telling about the time when, like St. Paul, he was on the road to Damascus. "I called my name to a man I met at

the washroom at this oasis. He said, 'Not Thomas Dorsey, the music man.' I said, 'Well, one of them, anyway; Tommy Dorsey, the band leader, is dead.' He said no, he meant me, and before the evening was over, everybody there was singing 'Precious Lord.' They knew it, too."

Somehow, Dorsey has been able to avoid much of the factionalism and jealousy that divided the gospel establishment through the years. "I've always tried to help everybody — all kinds of people. Music helped me to appreciate people even if they don't give me my price or what I think I should have. In a very simple way, I think I've done some good. There's more people than ever — particularly more young people — singing gospel, and more places where it's being exposed. I guess you could say I advertise for God, and He sends something to me."

T. W.