

# INTRODUCTION

God has placed a people in the Americas who exemplify an indomitable spirit. Arriving in chains and destined for centuries-long servitude, those once bound to forced subjection have risen to the most influential seats of world power. They have become business leaders, politicians, ministers, and missionaries—less than 150 years after they were freed from the physical chains that bound them. They are African Americans.

Among the multitudes of great African Americans, we find some of the most preeminent minds the world has ever known. Some were orators who, through the very sound of their voices, changed the world around them. Others produced innovations and inventions that influenced history. We also discover abolitionists who forced open the strongest links that bound their people in chains. There were still others whose accomplishments never made headlines, but who displayed the same unconquerable spirit that distinguished their African American brothers and sisters.

Webster's Dictionary defines "soul" as the immaterial essence, animating principle, or actuating cause of an individual life. There is no better way to describe the valiant but often uncelebrated African American heroes of our time and times past. Every American owes a debt of gratitude to these heroes, whose principles guided them in a cause that gave purpose and action to their individual lives.

God Has *Soul*—Celebrating *the Indomitable Spirit of African Americans* commemorates these heroes. It celebrates those African Americans who shone brightly in the midst of the darkest hours of their history. It celebrates the unyielding perseverance of those who refused to give up on life, even when surrender seemed to be the only option.

Through these inspiring stories you will be reminded that when God is on your side there is always a way to overcome, no matter how difficult life becomes.

## MAHALIA JACKSON—CHANGING THE FACE OF GOSPEL Music

*I loved best to sing in the congregation of our church—  
the Mount Moriah Baptist Church. All around me, I  
could hear the foot-tapping and hand-clapping. That  
gave me bounce. I like it much better than being up in  
the choir singing the anthem. I liked to sing the songs  
which testify to the glory of the Lord—those anthems are  
too dead and cold for me. As David said in the Bible—  
"Make a joyful noise unto the Lord!"—that was me.*

—MAHALIA JACKSON

Of all the great gospel musicians of our time, there is perhaps no other single person who has influenced the sound of gospel music more than Mahalia Jackson. Born in New Orleans around 1911, she was the daughter of a Baptist preacher and a mother who worked as a maid. Sadly, her father was often absent from her life, and her mother died at a young age. Her extended family raised her.

Mahalia is said to have begun singing as soon as she could walk and talk. Her music career began in the world-famous jazz and blues music scene in New Orleans, Louisiana. She grew up during the Great Depression, when things were difficult for many—especially blacks in the South. In response to this depression, Mahalia sang. If it weren't for the hard times, we may never have heard her powerful voice fill the airwaves all over the country.

## *God Has Soul*

The trying financial times of the day led a group of young people from the Greater Salem Baptist Church to form a singing and entertainment group. They sang and performed skits for \$1.50 per night. The money paid coal and mortgage payments. Soon their talent took them outside of the city, into surrounding states, and to national church conventions.

It seemed that the more opportunities this group of talented young people had, the more people began to resent them. They were accused of bringing jazz into the church. Many people did not appreciate the hand-clapping and the stomping. Some said that their performance was not dignified enough.

After the group performed in one church, the preacher stood up and condemned them for the style of music they sang. To this, Mahalia responded by saying that she had been born to sing gospel music. She reminded the pastor of the Psalm that says, "Oh, clap your hands, all ye people! Shout unto the Lord with a voice of triumph!" She exclaimed, "If it was undignified, it was what the Bible told me to do!" Mahalia kept on singing.

She became well known throughout the country for her unique presentation of gospel music. Her style was alive! When the freedom movements began among blacks with Martin Luther King Jr. as their foremost figure, Mahalia Jackson was among them.

The crowds were immense. People had gathered as far as the eye could see that warm day at the Lincoln Memorial. Mahalia sat waiting for her turn to address the crowd in song. Then, at the

request of Doctor King, she began to sing the song "I Been Boked and I Been Scorned." As her voice began to fill the air, a great murmur came rolling back from the multitude. The song touched the hearts of countless thousands of people. Tears and laughter filled the air, and Mahalia began to shout for joy. The great multitude joined in worship toward God, singing, swaying, and clapping their hands. Ironically, this behavior was the very thing Mahalia had been criticized for years earlier, but the power of her voice and God's call upon her life were more than enough to quiet her critics.

After the minutes-long revival meeting, while Mahalia was still catching her breath from leading the congregation in song, Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. stood up and delivered the speech that made him famous. It could be that the power and conviction in the voice of Mahalia Jackson motivated him to raise his voice, and like never before, sound the alarm for freedom. From the moment she sat down, the Civil Rights Movement marched on in full force.

