

# Speaker tells history of gospel

By ERIN GIBSON  
Senior Reporter

Sacred gospel music chronicled the struggles of American blacks against whites and between factions of their own culture, a distinguished professor and musician said Sunday night.

Bernice Johnson Reagon, an American University history professor, author and professional musician, opened the third annual Abraham Lincoln Lecture Series in Kimball Hall accompanied by the Lincoln Community Gospel Choir.

Reagon traced the beginnings of the gospel movement, now visible in any American church that sings praises through a gospel choir.

Although most Christian churches today use a gospel choir in joyous celebration, the roots of gospel were not always joyous, she said.

In the beginning, blacks would "use the tradition at strategic times to help the people survive," Reagon said. The gospel movement began when black Americans escaped slavery, she said, and later were emancipated and

moved into the cities seeking greater freedom.

"The fresh air of the South was stagnant, choking and binding," she said.

The gospel tradition soon would help an uprooted four million blacks deal with a new city environment, where they often were not accepted — even by other blacks.

The new urban blacks walked between Western rules and black culture, adding their own style to traditional black hymns. Innovative black songwriters brought gospel out of the church and into mainstream black culture, Reagon said.

For instance, Philadelphia preacher Charles Albert Tenley copyrighted gospel tunes, including "Stand By Me" in 1902. The song later formed the base for Benny King's popular, secular tune by the same title in the 1950s.

Tenley also introduced "I Will Overcome Someday," which later evolved into the song popular in the 1960s civil rights movement.

Black gospel composers' songs

were not always accepted, she said. Not even the organ was accepted when it was first introduced.

"Inside the culture there was a dialogue over what people needed," she said.

Songwriters after Tenley struggled to introduce blues and jazz singing into the black gospel tradition. They met opposition, she said, even at traditional, all-black institutions, including Howard University.

The music resulting from these internal struggles continues to change and document the happenings in black culture today, Reagon said.

Reagon will continue her walk through the roots of the American gospel tradition at 7:30 p.m. Monday through Wednesday this week and Thursday at 4 p.m.

Monday's lecture will be held at the Clyde Malone Community Center, 2032 U St. Tuesday and Thursday Reagon will be back in Kimball Hall, and Wednesday she will travel to St. Paul Methodist Church, 1144 M St.

All lectures are free and open to the public.

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