Dorsey, Thomas Andrew


Dorsey was the son of a revivalist preacher. He was influenced in childhood by blues pianists in the Atlanta, Ga., area and worked in secular "hokum" music as a composer, arranger, pianist, and vocalist from 1910 through 1928. In 1916 he moved to Chicago, where he attended the College of Composition and Arranging. In the 1920s he toured with Ma Rainey and his own bands, often featuring the slide guitarist Tampa Red.

From 1929 on Dorsey worked exclusively within a religious setting, consciously applying blues melodies and rhythms to spiritual concerns. Dozens of his optimistic and sentimental songs became gospel standards, notably "Precious Lord, Take My Hand" (1932). He recorded extensively in the early 1930s, publishing his own sheet music and lyrics. From 1932 Dorsey was choral director of the Pilgrim Baptist Church in Chicago. He founded the National Convention of Gospel Choirs and Choruses in Chicago in 1933, serving as its president for 40 years. He stopped recording in 1934 but toured widely into the 1940s. Thereafter, though he continued writing, he concentrated on lecturing and administrative duties.

BIBLIOGRAPHY.