



# Downhome Gospel: African American Spiritual Activism in Wiregrass Country

*Jerrilyn McGregor*

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**Downhome Gospel: African American Spiritual Activism in Wiregrass Country** Jerrilyn McGregory  
Jerrilyn McGregory explores sacred music and spiritual activism in a little-known region of the South, the Wiregrass Country of Georgia, Alabama, and North Florida. She examines African American sacred music outside of Sunday church-related activities, showing that singing conventions and anniversary programs fortify spiritual as well as social needs. In this region African Americans maintain a social world of their own creation. Their cultural performances embrace some of the most pervasive forms of African American sacred music—spirituals, common meter, Sacred Harp, shape-note, traditional, and contemporary gospel. Moreover, the contexts in which they sing include present-day observations such as the Twentieth of May (Emancipation Day), Burial League Turnouts, and Fifth Sunday.

Rather than tracing the evolution of African American sacred music, this ethnographic study focuses on contemporary cultural performances, almost all by women, which embrace all forms. These women promote a female-centered theology to ensure the survival of their communities and personal networks. They function in leadership roles that withstand the test of time. Their spiritual activism presents itself as a way of life.

In Wiregrass Country, “You don’t have to sing like an angel” is a frequently expressed sentiment. To these women, “good” music is God’s music regardless of the manner delivered. Therefore, Downhome Gospel presents gospel music as being more than a transcendent sound. It is local spiritual activism that is writ large. Gospel means joy, hope, expectation, and the good news that makes the soul glad.

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