

Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee



John Robert Bradley (1919-2007)

John Robert Lee Bradley was born in Memphis, Tennessee to John and Lela Ellis Bradley on October 5, 1919. Reared by his mother, Bradley and his brother grew up poverty-stricken. His mother worked in a laundry but experienced difficulty making ends meet. In *A Wealth of Wisdom*, Bradley stated "I know what it is to be hungry. I know what it is to need shoes. I know what it is to not have a house to live in, because they had set our little furniture out on the street because my mother couldn't pay the rent." He withdrew from school around the third grade lacking the rudimentary reading and writing skills. Yet, he was gifted with a classical baritone voice.

Around age twelve, Bradley joined other children outside Ellis Auditorium in Memphis, at a National Baptist Convention Christmas Eve program where low-wealth children singing in a church choir were gifted clothes and Christmas stockings. Bradley "sang his way" into the convention hall, where he met Lucie Campbell, the convention's music director and a pioneering gospel songwriter. In her role, Campbell introduced young promising talent and auditioned musicians to the convention's audiences such as Marian Anderson, Thomas A. Dorsey, and Mahalia Jackson. Impressed by Bradley, Campbell became his mentor, introduced him to the National Baptist Convention and made him the lead singer in her newly-organized Good Will Singers Quartet that toured nationally. Campbell chose Bradley to introduce her newest compositions and he became the best-known interpreter of her songs.

Known for his rich baritone voice, Bradley received voice lessons from Charles Faulkner

Bryan, head of Tennessee Polytechnic Institute's (TPI, now Tennessee Technological University) music division. In 1938, during the era of Jim Crow segregation, Bradley met Charles and Edith Bryan at a revival in McMinnville, Tennessee, where they were the only whites in the audience. Bradley had appeared before live audiences for years and developed a classical style. Surprised by the quality of his voice, the Bryans introduced themselves to the young baritone after the show. Charles Bryan feared that Bradley would damage his voice if he did not learn the proper technique and he offered to give Bradley lessons. The two began a week of lessons the next day, after which Bryan asked Bradley to stay in touch. As noted in Laura Clemons' article "The Missionaries of TPI," Bryan risked his own career to assist Bradley in establishing his.

In the fall of 1938, Bradley left the revival singers and moved to Cookeville, Tennessee, where the Bryans arranged for him to live with an African American pastor. Once Bradley became established in Cookeville, Bryan began teaching him on the campus of Tennessee Polytechnic Institute (TPI). However, because the campus was racially segregated, voice lessons were given covertly at night. By day, Edith Bryan taught Bradley to read and write. Ultimately, the school's president, Q. M. Smith, discovered that Bryan was giving Bradley voice lessons. Smith went against the racial mores of the day and allowed Bryan to continue working with Bradley. After a year of working with Bryan, the baritone singer left Cookeville and moved to Nashville.

In the early 1940s, Bradley decided to study

classical music. With help from Lucie Campbell and Dr. A. M. Townsend of the Sunday School Publishing Board of the National Baptist Convention, U. S. A., he studied voice with Wagnerian singer Edythe Walker in New York, where he made his Carnegie Hall debut. Later, he studied classical music in London and performed for the king and queen of England in 1955 where he made his Royal Albert Hall debut. He studied at London's Trinity College and sang for BBC radio. He also performed at the World Baptist Alliance (WBA) in London, where Campbell introduced him to global Baptist congregations throughout Europe and Scandinavia. Bradley sang her version of *The Lord Is My Shepherd*. Due to his success and numerous repeat performances at the WBA, Bradley became known as "Mister Baptist" and became one of the most visible faces of African American Baptists.

During the course of his concert career, John Robert Bradley performed at concerts across Europe and the Americas, where he sang arias, lieder and spirituals. Notwithstanding his success as a concert performer, "Mr. Baptist" continued singing in churches and gospel concerts. He always made sure to include such songs as *Amazing Grace*, *Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child*, and *You've Got to Love Everybody*. During the era of the Modern Civil Rights Movement, Bradley used his singing as a means of breaking down racial barriers. While whites would not listen to African American preachers, he noted, they would listen to him sing. Consequently, he was able to break down some racial impediments across the South.

The renowned singer recorded his first gospel single for the Apollo label in 1950 and went on to record for Decca. Apollo 211's sides were *Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel*, and *If Jesus Had to Pray*. At the same session for Apollo, Bradley recorded the unreleased *Must Jesus Bear the Cross Alone*, *Poor Pilgrim of Sorrow*, *Lord Hear my Plea*, and a magisterial reading of *He's Got the Whole World in His Hands*. Twelve years

later, Bradley recorded LP's for Battle Records (1962), Decca Records (1965), Nashboro Records (*I'll Fly Away*, 1974) and Spirit Feel/Shanachie, among others. In 1997, he recorded several cuts for Tony Heilbut's collection *All God's Sons & Daughters: Chicago Gospel Legends*, which Heilbut's Spirit Feel label released in 1999.

After the 1963 demise of Lucie Campbell, Bradley succeeded her as director of music for the National Baptist Convention, U. S. A., Inc. On February 2, 1972, Bradley, the National Baptist Convention's most popular singer, paid homage to the renowned gospel vocalist Mahalia Jackson, when he rendered a song at her funeral. In 1993, with assistance from the Rev. Amos Jones, Bradley's memoir, *In the Hands of God: The Life Story of J. Robert Bradley, an Autobiography*, was published by Sunday School Publishing Board of the National Baptist Convention, U. S. A. Inc. John Robert Bradley made his last performance at the National Baptist Convention in 2005.

A favorite singer of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., he was knighted in Liberia by President William Tolbert in 1975. Mahalia Jackson once noted, "Nobody need mess with 'Amazing Grace' after Bradley. . ." A member of Spruce Street Baptist Church, Sir J. Robert Bradley died on May 3, 2007. He was funeralized at Spruce Street and interred next to his mother in Greenwood Cemetery on May 7, 2007.

Linda T. Wynn