

Researcher finds civil rights songs on flip side of gospel records

by [John Rutledge](#)

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WACO, Texas (ABP) -- A Baylor University professor says a surprisingly large number of lesser-known "B" sides on vintage records of gospel songs championed civil rights, suggesting Christian artists were interested in bettering the here and now as well as proclaiming hope for the hereafter.

The recent discovery "tells us that the gospel community was much more involved in the civil rights movement than we previously thought -- outside of Mahalia Jackson and Dorothy Love Coates, who we knew were very involved," said Robert Darden, an associate professor of journalism at Baylor and a former gospel editor for *Billboard* magazine.

In 2005, Darden began a search-and-rescue mission for gospel music on old 78s, 45s and LPs and in various taped formats to be preserved digitally and cataloged at Baylor. Darden -- author of [People Get Ready! A New History of Black Gospel Music](#)

-- was concerned that while contemporary gospel was thriving, early gospel by lesser-known artists during the 1940s to the 1970s -- the "Golden Age of Gospel Music" -- might be lost forever. He now oversees Baylor's [Black Gospel Music Restoration Project](#).

"The reason we haven't known about the 'B' sides before is that more than a third of what we've received is not in the lone book that tries to catalog all gospel music," Darden said. "When we've known about a song, it is almost always the hit or 'A' side."

The songs related to civil rights may have escaped notice because few scholars are studying gospel music's impact on that issue, as well as the fact many of the artists are lesser known or even unknown, other

than by a small circle of friends, family members and church members, he said.

The spirited “Where is Freedom?” by The Friendly Four begins with a rousing appeal: “Here’s a freedom song for all you freedom fighters out there everywhere. And when you sing, remember the wonderful ones who lost their dedicated lives for this precious purpose and won’t be allowed to see it through. Now sing -- Sing, every one of you!”

The lyrics speak of civil rights marches and demonstrations in Atlanta, Tennessee, Birmingham and Chicago, of violence and snapping police dogs, of integration and equal rights.

The All-Star Gospel Singers recorded “I Believe Martin Luther King Made It Home.” And the somber “Tribute to Dr. Martin Luther King” by Franklin Fondel speaks of the civil rights leader whose “voice was his weapon that opened barred doors.... He’s free now forever, like all men should be, regardless of color, religion or creed.”

One of the well-known individuals who sang of civil rights was Della Reese, a gospel singer before she became a pop singer and star of TV’s “Touched by an Angel.” She sang “Simple Song of Freedom.”

--For more information about the project, visit www.baylor.edu/lib/gospel.