



# ELDER CHARLES D. BECK

*“Your Man of Faith” and “Trumpet of the Religious World”*

*by Opal Nations*

A man or woman of distinction, such as someone who claims with a prayer and the laying on of the hand to make rich those on the verge of bankruptcy, or to heal the sick and to make those who are chair-bound rise up and walk again, would perhaps want to reinvent his or her family lineage. In the case of Charles D. Beck, we will perhaps never know for sure whether, as the story goes, his mother came from Ghana and his father, an extremely talented and capable man, was at one time chief over the Ewe tribes in the province of Ibadan, West Nigeria. Beck might even have claimed a link or passing down from father to son of Ewe spiritual customs. The Ewe religion was not only practiced in Guinea and east into those countries bordering the Gulf of Guinea but was carried by slaves across the Atlantic into Cuba, Haiti and The West Indies. The West Indian title for this religion was Voodoo or Vodoo, in Ewe meaning “the wor-

ship of a superhuman spirit”.

In any event, Beck certainly believed he had the power to heal by faith, and as witnesses attest, he did help make people solvent and well. Interestingly, Mrs. Beck’s mother, Anna Shepherd, was once a gospel singer and composer, said to have written “Only A Look,” a song made widely popular by **The Roberta Martin Singers** on Apollo Records in 1949.

Born May 16, 1902 in Mobile, Alabama, young Charles taught himself to play a variety of musical instruments. These included drums, trumpets, vibes, piano, organ and sax. His instrument of choice at first was the piano. Beck’s role model for gospel piano was Dallas-born pioneer Pentecostalist “**Blind**” **Arizona Dranes**, one of the early exponents of a new, livelier, more emotional kind of church music. In the late 1920s Beck was taken on as pianist by Elder Curry who pastored The Church of God in Christ in Jackson, Mississippi. By this

point, Beck had built a sizable reputation and was considered one of the finest sanctified piano players in Mississippi.

Elder Curry had made arrangements to record for the Okeh race label field unit at a makeshift studio situated at the King Edward Hotel in Jackson, just a few days before Christmas in 1930. Beck was taken along as accompanist, together with an assortment of congregational singers. One of the first warm-up songs recorded was the lively “Memphis Flu” which describes the flu epidemic that swept through the South after World War II. Curry strummed guitar and JoAnn Williams carried the lead while Beck played a rocking piano over a much-enthused congregation.

It is interesting to note that Beck’s pumping piano style bears a striking similarity to that of **Marjorie Cheeks** who thirty years later on accompanied her husband, **Julius Cheeks** and his group, **The Gospel Knights**. On the same





*Elder Beck deliverin' his singin' sermon...*

session, Beck recorded two piano instrumentals, the unreleased "Crucifixion" and "When The World Is On Fire". The Okeh unit was so impressed with Beck's "ragtime" approach to "When The World Is On Fire" that they invited him back the next day to record

again. The result was "Drinking Shine", a.k.a. "God Don't Like It" which he played and sang with great skill.

Okeh issued Beck's ode to the evils of moonshine coupled with "When The World Is On Fire". It became an immediate success.

After Beck was ordained a C.O.G.I.C. minister by Bishop Mason, he was given a ministry first in Memphis, then in Chicago.

Gospel music was undergoing a series of changes. Dorsey's blues-shaded gospel tunes were gradually being accepted by the elders of the African-American church. At a service Beck held at a C.O.G.I.C. in Richmond, Virginia, he had invited **Nat King Cole** and his brother **Ike** to perform during the service. Early on Beck saw few boundaries between church and popular musics.

By 1937, Beck had set himself up as a singing evangelist and had relocated to New York. He had fallen under the spell of "Sweet Daddy" Grace, an African-Portuguese (Cape Verdean) immigrant who had set himself up as a Pentecostal spiritualist at his own non color-bar ministry, The United House of Prayer in Harlem. Grace encouraged trance by having his flock "dance with the spirit" to "shout" bands made up principally of brass instruments such as trombones and trumpets. Grace had brought the funereal street-band tradition up from New Orleans and was using it to get the "spirit on the move" in his church.

In May 1937, Beck recorded one of the first versions of **Dorsey's** "Precious Lord" for Decca Records. By now, his voice had matured but his eight-to-the-bar piano style had not changed much over the years. A second Decca session a month later netted "Love, Oh Love Divine", a spiritual adaptation of **W.C. Handy's** "Careless Love", plus five others all





Elder Beck collects...

sounding more like blues than gospel songs.

By 1939, the "Daddy" Grace influences had come to the fore. Beck's July session for Blue Bird sounded in every way like a fresh departure from the frocked **Fats Waller** image of times before. It was at this session Beck recorded the renowned "(Blow) Gabriel" on which he jubilantly played trumpet and alternated with singing, in front of a live congregation. For the first time, we hear the choir of his ministry, The Way of the Cross Church of God in Christ on Genesee Street in Buffalo, NY, on such numbers as "I've Got Heaven On My Mind", "Dry Bones" and five others. The Way of the Cross Church was a slightly modified theatre with its stage intact. This suited the wild singing and dancing which usually took place during service between healing product plugs and faith-healing sessions.

Beck's skills were sought by other branches of the denomination, at churches scattered around the country. He soon found himself a visiting minister at his own church. The Second World War brought about change. More and more of Beck's time was taken up with political issues and the fight to break segregation. In 1943 Beck befriended Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, one of the nation's first Black congressmen, and the pair, as part of a special Afro-American delegation, were invited to the White House to discuss solutions to the recent racial unrest in Harlem with President Roosevelt.

Beck did not record again until 1946 when he signed with the tiny Eagle Record label. By now, he had set up a remote hook-up whereby he could broadcast early every Monday morning between the hours of 12:20 and 2:00 am over WKBW in Buffalo from the station or his church. The broadcast was eventually syndicated on thirty stations. Sometimes he broadcast with his gospel caravan over WHAT in

Philadelphia, the same station where Jocko Henderson and Georgie Woods later on made their reputations playing R&B.

Leaflets, charms and other paraphernalia could be had from Beck's mailing address, P.O. Box 2082 in Buffalo. Beck received a great deal of mail through his programs. Eagle Records issued eight sides on Beck in 1946, all but two were picked up by Imperial in Hollywood. Most present Beck in a hip, jazzy almost **Slim Gaillard**-like vein with **George Hornsby** on piano.

In 1948 Beck signed with Ivin Ballen's Gotham imprint in Philadelphia where he recorded a dozen sides, including good muggings of Rev. J.M. Gates. "There's A Dead Cat On The Line" and "Don't Ride That Hellbound Train". On Beck's somewhat hip and upbeat "Dead Cat On The Line" he sings and plays upright bass. "Didn't It Rain" was given the **Louis Jordan** treatment while pianist **Bertha Potter-Beck** (Charles Beck's wife) "fancied up" the keys. "Don't Ride That Hellbound Train" was supported by **The Beck Singers** and is convincingly conveyed in Gates' imitable style. Beck's rendering of "You've Got To Move" most certainly influenced Rev. Robert Ballinger's way around a song. Beck's reading of "He Knows How Much I Can Bear" was years ahead of its time with its tremolo guitar and modern vocal shadings.

Beck's move to King Records in July 1950 gives us a more sanctified singing approach with full choral or congregational support. For the first time all his blues-jazz-R&B ingredients come together in one identifiable style. One of Beck's finest efforts was "Wine Head Willie Put That Bottle Down", a clever, comic narrative that swings like crazy with Beck himself on organ. Recorded for Chess in early 1953, it should have put Beck on top. Neither

truly a gospel record or R&B opus, "Wine Head Willie" (based on "That's What's The Matter With The Church Today") is more of a religious parody than a church song. Beck's voice by this time seems hardened and rough, lacking the range demonstrated on his earlier sides.

Beck continued to host nationally known gospel quartets at his church. **The Swan Silvertones**, **Dixie Hummingbirds** and **Hightower Brothers**, among others, concertized at The Way of The Cross.

Beck's tour de force was his 1956 Chart label recording of "Rock & Roll Sermon", Parts 1 & 2, where rock and roll, as demonstrated with the use of stinging guitar runs, was blamed for all the ills and sins of society. Beck's comic admonitions, however, did not sit well with certain members of the church establishment. Cleveland's tabloid, *The Call & Post*, reported that a heated controversy was brewing over the role of music in the church, more specifically the church service. Two prominent members of the clergy, the Rev. Howard O. Jones of Snoot Memorial and Elder Charles D. Beck of The Way of The Cross were on opposite sides of the issue. Jones remarked that modern musicians and entertainers had taken the hymns and spirituals of the church and had "desecrated" them in dance halls and nightclubs. Beck in his reply said that it was wrong to pirate the music of the church but that the churches themselves were partly to blame because so many were "too proud to put the spirit in their own music".

"The church should have plenty of rhythm. I have it in my church. I do not believe we should suppress the spirit. I'll raise my foot to make a sanctified leg for God. And I'll play my trumpet until Gabriel, the King of trumpet players, sounds the last mighty blast this old planet shall hear. I'll join in with that heavenly choir and we'll march through the Pearly Gates playing "When The Saints Go Marching In," said Beck.

The article went on to add that in Beck's revival sessions he often utilized his own "religious swing quartet" featuring a vocal group and himself providing the music by switching, sometimes during the course of a song, from trumpet to vibes, sax, bongos, Hammond B3 piano, bass and drums.

Shortly after this, Beck recorded a full album for Folkways at his church. Beck himself played a variety of instruments (twenty-three in all at this point), sang and preached. Guest musicians, including his son, played and performed, most notable musicians such as **The Heavenly Gospel Singers** of Buffalo and the great **Goldia Haynes**, rendered cameo performances. For one reason or another, Folkways chose to withhold some of their recorded material.

Excluded items included a rousing "At the Cross" with full-throated choir, a testimonial from the fiery, dynamic, Caucasian-Canadian Pentecostal minister, Rev. White, a tambourine-driven version of Rev. Kelsey's "Little Boy" (How Old Are You), a testimony from a Mr. Nickolson of Boston on the healing powers of a crucifix given by Elder Beck, a revivalist reading of "Glory, Glory Hallelujah" with Beck blasting away on trumpet, an explosive reprise





*Bringin' in the sheaves...*

of Beck's signature song, "Blow Gabriel", on which he demonstrated technique on trumpet, vibes, bongos and back to vibes, trumpet, maracas and bongos again, switching from one to the other over a period of nine minutes, a jubilant version of "Rock Daniel" in 4/4 time from a broadcast recorded in Washington, DC, a Beck-sung improvised version of "Walk With Me", plus a choral arrangement of "So Glad, He Set Me Free" lead by Brother Raymond Corbin, lining-hymn rendition of "Shine On Me" followed by "There's A Man Over The River" given in testimony, a reprise of Kelsey's "Little Boy" (How Old Are You) and lastly, a flowery, ornamental, off-the-cuff crooning of "Watching And Waiting" preceding a beautiful a-cappella version of "When The Saints Go Marching In" by **The Jordan Hummingbirds** of Buffalo. Enough material for a second Folkways collection.

During the early 1960s, Beck retraced his parents' footsteps by venturing out on a missionary campaign to West Africa. Beck was well received and was bestowed the key to the City of Monrovia in Liberia by V.S. Tubman. He was also, as legend has it, elected Bishop over the Holiness Churches in Ghana for his interest in and close ties with the country.

Elder Charles D. Beck died of a heart attack brought about by a compound of related complications in September 1966 in Buffalo. His widow, Bertha Potter-Beck, lives in perfect health today in Philadelphia. Beck's stepson Elder Anthony Beck also has enjoyed a lengthy and creditable career in music. As a bass player, he has played with such nationally acclaimed artists as The Dixie Hummingbirds and **The Stars of Faith**. His help on this article has been indispensable.

*With thanks to Elder Anthony Beck, Eric LeBlanc, Bob Laughton and Ken Romanowski.*