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## Wright, Eleanor A. Crews (1926–1992)

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### DAN SHULTZ

Dan Shultz, emeritus professor of music, Walla Walla University, has researched and written extensively about Seventh-day Adventist music history and musicians. His publications include *A Great Tradition*—a history of music at Walla Walla University, and the *Adventist Musicians Biographical Resource*—an encyclopedia with biographies of over 1100 Adventist musicians. He founded the International Adventist Musicians Association, serving as its president for ten years and editing its publications and website for over thirty years. Shultz and his wife, Carolyn (nee Stevens), live in College Place, Washington.

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Eleanor Wright was a prolific gospel music writer, singer, pianist, and arranger who led in launching the Blend Wright

Trio.<sup>1</sup>

## The Wright Family Ensemble

Eleanor Crews was born in Dayton, Ohio, on November 20, 1926, the thirteenth of fourteen children and the last daughter of Nora and William Crews.<sup>2</sup> She displayed musical talent at an early age and was taught piano by her older brothers. When she married Harold Wright at age eighteen, she became a member of the Wright Family Ensemble, a well-known musical group in the eastern and midwestern United States.<sup>3</sup>

Eleanor later wrote about an early encounter with her husband's family during their courtship and about life in the Wright family:

On a beautiful spring day in 1944, I heard for the first time the song that was to change my life. I'd been invited by a young man whom I was dating to attend a concert of gospel music to be given by his family. The cramped conditions, as we traveled by auto to the church where the concert was to be held seemed to bother no one but me. For a while, as they laughed and talked, I could think of nothing other than that my dress was a wrinkled mess.

But when four of the young ladies broke into a song with sweet harmony and mellow tones and expressions that called to me from every phrase, I forgot my discomfort and said silently "God, what is happening to me?" I was seventeen years old and for the first time in my life, I experienced the deep feelings that have since overcome me time and time again when the message and melody of a song become mine.<sup>4</sup>

Harold's brother Dale taught her to play guitar chords on the piano, and she then taught herself, going beyond that basic instruction. Although she had had no formal training in music as a child, her musical gifts, coupled with the hands-on experience of performing and learning by rote on her own, compensated for that lack.<sup>5</sup>

## The Blend Wright Trio

In her mid-twenties, Eleanor and Harold cofounded the 100-voice Sweet Chariot Choir, which sang with well-known national recording stars Mahalia Jackson and Aretha Franklin. She later formed the Blend Wright Trio, a women's trio that included herself and two sisters-in-law, Audrey and Jackie, which toured widely, performing concerts of her music in the United States, Bermuda, and Switzerland.<sup>6</sup>

The Blend Wright Trio recorded four albums, the first two with Savoy Recordings: *Let Down the Ladder* (1963) and *Over the Sunset Mountain* (1964). For the Adventist-owned Chapel Records, they recorded *These are the Hands That Bled for Me* and, on Chapel's Bridge label, *The Greatest Gift* (1974). They also recorded, with soloist Larry Blackwell, *God Whispered to Me* for Chapel's Blue Seal Series.<sup>7</sup>

Inspired by an online video of Wright performing near the end of her life, in February 1990, Yvette Harris Hodges would recall her experience as a child hearing the trio perform:

I remember when I was a kid the Blend Wright trio came to visit St. Louis at Berean for a concert. The place was packed. The lights were off, and they just had spotlights on them. We had never heard anything like them before! The music was electrifying! The words made you think. She was such a gifted song writer and musician.<sup>8</sup>

## Songwriter

In addition to gospel songs, Wright also wrote anthems and children's and wedding songs. She taught piano to children and wrote and illustrated the *Keyboard Cousins Method* for teaching that age group. She recorded on Chapel Records, Savoy Recordings, and her own Eleanor Wright label.<sup>9</sup>

Del Delker, noted Voice of Prophecy singer, included one of her songs, "Hallelujah, Home at Last," on a 1974 Chapel album named for that song. "Surely, Surely," a meditative song by Wright, is hymn 688 in the 1985 *Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal*. "Naaman the Leper," "Cover Me," and "A Better Day," as well as others, are still sung by performers. Manna Music, Screen Gems, and Arioso Music published her music.<sup>10</sup>

Many of her songs begin with the struggle that some Christians have in dealing with the realities of this life, such as sin or racial inequalities. She preferred to call her songs not gospel music but "message music," songs that always end with a message of hope and deliverance through Christ, music that ministers to everyday needs with assurances such as: "I'm going to ride on a rainbow road, travel the Milky Way; I'm going to live in a home, where I'll have no more rent to pay. There's going to be a better day, a better day – after a while."<sup>11</sup>

Wright wrote three youth congress theme songs, served as a member of an ad hoc advisory committee which reviewed music trends in black churches, and as a member of an advisory committee when the 1985 *Seventh-day Adventist Church Hymnal* was prepared. She served with evangelistic teams in the United States, Bermuda, and the African continent.<sup>12</sup>

Eleanor's other interests included painting, gourmet cooking, interior decorating, and shortwave radio.<sup>13</sup> Despite her many interests and activities, as well as financial hardships at times, she raised a family of six children.

On March 21, 1992, she was honored by an overflow crowd of 3,500 at the Sligo Seventh-day Adventist church in Takoma Park, Maryland. The benefit concert, "A Song for Eleanor," was sponsored by the Breath of Life church, Fort Washington, Maryland; and supported by Allegheny East Conference churches in Washington, D.C, Baltimore, and Philadelphia. It was a gala occasion featuring more than twenty of her songs and included noted Adventist soloists, choirs, ensembles, videos, and a stage band. Guests included members of the Wright family and other musicians who had worked with her during her career. An offering was taken to help fund a compilation of her music in a songbook that would preserve her legacy for future musicians.<sup>14</sup>

Although Eleanor was still living in her hometown of Germantown, Ohio, at the time of the concert, she was unable to attend, having been recently diagnosed with cancer. Two months later, she died on May 24, at age 65.<sup>15</sup>

## Legacy

Following her death, Eleanor Wright was honored with a Lifetime Achievement Award, given at the United Christian Artists Association Music Legends Ball in 2008 in Hendersonville, Tennessee. The award was accepted by two of her daughters, Marci and Carla, and the finale of the program was a salute to Eleanor for her numerous contributions to gospel music. She was also honored at that time with an announcement of a scholarship in her name for music education students at Oakwood University.<sup>16</sup>

Eleanor Wright is credited with composing over 200 songs, publishing three songbooks, and recording several albums.<sup>17</sup> She was arguably one of the most influential persons to help gain acceptance for gospel music of the black experience in the Seventh-day Adventist church.

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## NOTES

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