

This Day in History... April 21, 1924

Birth of Clara Ward

Gospel singer Clara Mae Ward was born on April 21, 1924, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. She was a talented singer who helped push gospel from churches into nightclubs, which earned her both praise and criticism.

Ward's mother, Gertrude Mae Ward, was instrumental in helping her become successful. When the singer was young, her mother formed a family group with Clara and her sister Willa, who provided piano accompaniment. They started out as the Ward Singers but were also known as The Consecrated Gospel Singers and the Ward Trio. Ward made her first solo recording in 1940.

In 1943, the Ward Singers performed at the National Gospel Convention in Philadelphia. After that, they began touring the country. In 1947, Henrietta Waddy from South Carolina joined the group. They began using

the miming style in some songs – such as pretending to pack a suitcase while singing “Packin’ Up.” Some took issue with this, calling it “clowning,” but audiences loved it. Marion Williams joined the group shortly after Waddy. She was a powerful singer able to reach the highest soprano registers.

By 1949, the group had gained significant national fame. They performed on television and began recording their music. In 1950, they performed at Carnegie Hall for the first time. During that concert, they sang alongside Mahalia Jackson. A group characterized by flamboyance and energy; their biggest hit was “Surely God Is Able.” Singing was just part of the group’s appeal. Tired of the plain choir robes, Clara designed extravagant outfits for members to wear during performances, and sometimes they wore wigs. Ward

was also one of the first women to implement the lead-switching singing style, which was mostly used by male gospel groups up to that point.

Over time, other singers joined the group, including Esther Ford, Frances Steadman, and Kitty Parham. Ward’s mother created a gospel booking agency and publishing house. She also wrote a manual for churches to encourage them to create and foster gospel programs. And she created the Clara Ward Specials to accompany the Ward Singers. However, by 1958, most of the women left the Ward Singers and formed their own group – the Stars of Faith.

Ward then formed the Clara Ward Singers. She was the first gospel singer to perform with a 100-piece symphony orchestra and the second gospel star to sing gospel on Broadway in Langston Hughes’s *Tambourines to Glory*. Ward also sang backup for several popular songs, including Dee Dee Sharp’s “Mashed Potato Time.” In the 1960s and 70s, Ward made a few records on which she sang pop, blues, folk, and country and western songs. Among these were the Beatles’s “Help” and Bill Withers’s “Lean on Me.”

In 1968, The Clara Ward Singers performed in Vietnam with the USO. They were a popular act, but it was a dangerous tour. They survived a hotel bombing in which several guests died. Despite this, Ward returned to Vietnam for a second tour in 1969 and the group received recognition from the US Army.

Over the years, Ward also appeared in a few movies, including *Its Your Thing* and *Spreed*. She co-starred in *A Time to Sing* with Hank Williams Jr. Her group made dozens of TV appearances and toured Australia, Japan, Europe, Indonesia, and Thailand. She was also a mentor to Aretha Franklin. Ward suffered the first of three strokes in 1967 and died on January 16, 1973. She was posthumously inducted into the Songwriters Hall of Fame.



From the 1998 Gospel Singers issue



Ward's group performed alongside Mahalia Jackson at Carnegie Hall in 1950.



Ward sang in and directed Hughes' Tambourines to Glory in 1963.



Ward went on two tours to Vietnam to perform with the USO.

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