

ASHLEY CLEVELAND

God Don't Never Change

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In some very real ways, *God Don't Never Change* is Ashley Cleveland's first gospel record.

Yes, the new record is Ashley's eighth full-length project. Yes, she's been plying her trade in the ephemeral corner of the music world called "Christian music" pretty much from the get-go, crafting earthy songs with a heavenly message for nearly two decades. And yes, she's even recorded an entire album of hymns, 2005's *Men & Angels Say*.

The songs on *God Don't Never Change* – ranging from the Blind Willie Johnson title track or the Washington Phillips tune "Denomination Blues" or the echoes of Mattie Moss Clark on "Going To Heaven To Meet The King" – send Cleveland in yet another direction.

These vintage black gospel songs come from a rich history of struggle and pain, more from open-sky fields than high-ceilinged cathedrals, and have found their latest voice in a woman willing to work hard to find her own place within them.

"I've always been interested in other people's songs," Ashley says. "These songs and old hymns, both types of music, speak to such a specific place in my soul. They're so much a part of my life, having grown up in the South, and that music is part of my heritage as much as the hymns are.

God Don't Never Change was inspired by an NPR "Fresh Air" interview with Baylor University Journalism Professor Bob Darden in which he discussed his passion for old obscure recordings of black gospel music.

"Kenny [Greenberg, Ashley's producer/guitarist/husband] and I are both huge fans of Fresh Air and National Public Radio in general," Cleveland says. "So we were each in our separate cars, and we were listening to an episode where Terry Gross was interviewing Robert Darden. He has taken it upon himself to track down old, obscure recordings of soloists and choirs. Terry was interviewing him and it was fascinating, and then they'd play little pieces of the music.

"Kenny came home and said, 'I heard the most amazing thing on NPR,' and I said, 'I heard it too!' And he says, 'You need to make a record of that music. That's you. That's always been you. Why aren't you making this music?'"

This discussion about the next stage of Ashley's musical journey couldn't have come at a more opportune time. Veteran music executive Barry Landis was just entering into a relationship with industry leader KOCH Records about starting a Nashville office. Long an admirer of Ashley, Landis reached out to see what was on her musical horizon.

"When Barry asked what I had in mind for the next record we told him that we were thinking about making a black gospel record, and Barry jumped all over it." Ashley says, "All of a sudden, we had a label that said 'we can get on board with that.' Once it became real, I started gathering songs."

"What was hard for me was the singing. We're talking about trying to recreate a song that Mahalia Jackson sang, and it's intimidating. You're trying to step into some pretty big shoes," she continues.

“Several of those songs, I bet I went after those vocals 10 times before I was finally satisfied. Kenny would say they sounded great, and I’d insist that, no, it’s just not right.

“What makes those songs great for me is just this effortlessness that marked the delivery of the music. I was trying to get to a place where I could just forget about it.”

When you listen back to Ashley Cleveland’s body of work, it’s easy to hear why countless fans are captivated by the Knoxville, Tenn. native. Her passionate singing is matched only by her fearlessness in crafting her music.

That approach has won her the notice of critics and industry figures alike, making her the first woman to win a Grammy for Rock Gospel Album (for 1996’s *Lesson of Love*) and going three-for-three overall in that category over the years (1999’s *You Are There* and 2008’s *Before The Daylight’s Shot*.)

But in a textbook reversal of the “in that world, but not exactly of it” idea, Cleveland has spent the bulk of her career walking that fine line between the Christian and mainstream musical arenas, drawing the best out of both to create music for her rabid and steadfast fan base, even when she wondered herself what would come next.

“Over the years, I’ve accumulated enough material to keep going,” Ashley says. “We just put these records out ourselves, and we don’t do anything with it really because Kenny and I aren’t marketers...we’re musicians. I have enough of a fan base and enough of a profile that they sort of float along in a tiny stream and have their life.”

Finding that place where Ashley could give her all within the songs on *God Don’t Never Change* meant surrounding her with collaborators who knew her strengths and could play to them without any hesitation.

It doesn’t hurt that Kenny Greenberg is a world-class guitarist, with credits ranging from Willie Nelson to Etta James to Amy Grant to the Indigo Girls to Steven Curtis Chapman to Joan Baez, and every musical point in between. And the fact that he shares a home and a studio and a complementary musical brain with Ashley, from the point of her very first record on, is just a bonus.

“This record just runs parallel lines to what we had been doing,” Kenny says. “The last couple of records each had a couple of songs that were like this, like ‘Precious Lord’ or ‘Your Saving Grace,’ delving into that stripped-down blues kind of thing. It just seemed the natural thing to do.”

Adding to that comfort zone was an incomparable band – Chad Cromwell on drums, Michael Rhodes on bass and Reese Wynans on B3 organ – all of whom carry equally impressive musical resumes, and who have played with Ashley and Kenny for years.

So with the core of an experienced band in place, along with the invaluable aid of pianist Gordon Mote, *God Don’t Never Change* began to take shape and songs began to emerge, with the help of friends and fans alike.

“I had a few songs that I knew I wanted to do, like [the Edwin Hawkins Singers classic] ‘Joy Joy’ which I’d had since the ’70s,” Ashley says. “One fan sent me an old radio show from 1959 which features Mahalia Jackson being interviewed by Studs Terkel and singing. It was so fantastic to find the songs that I felt like I could really own to the fullest extent.”

Admittedly, it took a little bit of a move to the side for the longtime songwriter to shift into song interpreter. “It almost becomes like songwriting in a way, because I rearranged some things to fit more what I can do,” Ashley says. “The best example is the first song on the record ‘My God Called Me This Morning,’ because I found that on a Fairfield Four record and it was a cappella. It was magnificent, but I ain’t the Fairfield Four. When I tried to do it a cappella, it was pitiful.”

“I loved so much what this songs says, a tremendous declaration of an encounter with the living God, so I was determined to figure out how I could find my own way into the song,” she continues. “I sat down with my guitar and started going into different tunings and found this spot where I could own it. In a way, I collaborated with the song itself.”

For Ashley, gathering stories about the songs and the people who popularized them was an equally important part of the process. “I asked Odessa Settles, whose father Walter was the member of the Fairfield Four who sang the lead on that song, if they wrote this, and she said, ‘Oh, no, it’s just an old field holler,’” Ashley says.

“And then there was Reverend Gary Davis, who sang ‘You Gotta Move,’” and he embodies all the darkness and light of any great Old Testament figure you could possibly think of,” Ashley laughs. “He could write some pretty low-down blues music, but then he’d turn around and play these amazing gospel songs.

“That tension, to me, in what little I know about him, is so real and so true to every human being in the world. He just displayed it a little more entertainingly.”

As with all music that deals with The Word, the songs on *God Don’t Never Change* find their power in the words.

“With the hymns, it’s all about the poetry, where with black gospel, there’s this economy of words. Both types use straight scripture, but where the hymns will expand on it and the words will flow, the gospel song will have fewer words but the right ones,” Ashley says. “You’ve got ‘Keep Your Lamp Trimmed And Burning,’ which is a straight repetition from the Psalms, and then ‘see what the Lord has done.’ And you’re finished. That’s a lot of information in two lines.”

And as she has become a de facto historian and caretaker of these songs, Ashley Cleveland has grown in her understanding of how many of them emerged. “To me the most amazing thing is people taking horrible pain and loss and allowing something God-given and beautiful to come of it, as opposed to succumbing to bitterness,” she says. “These songs speak to the sorrow in my own soul, and they’re uplifting.”

It’s the work these songs were called to do, and it’s the work Ashley Cleveland and so many around her, are happy to help carry out.

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