

Ashley Cleveland steps out with *God Don't Never Change*
Celebration of vintage black gospel songs inspired by NPR Fresh Air interview with Bob Darden
Available May 19, 2009 on Koch Records

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Three time Grammy winner Ashley Cleveland will release her eighth full-length CD, *God Don't Never Change* on Koch Records May 19, 2009.

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

Cleveland has 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.

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.

"One of the great distinctives of African music is the beat, the rhythm," Darden says. "Forcibly transported to America, African rhythms have been at the heart of all significant musical trends in this country over the past 200 years, from the ragtime to rap. Though the songs on *God Don't Never Change* come from a host of traditions – black spirituals, folk songs, 18th century hymns, gospel blues, and jubilee – it is that insistent, incorruptible beat that unites them. If the spirituals and gospel music really are 'religion with rhythm,' and folk music really is the authentic music of the people, then these carefully chosen songs echo the pulse of a faith-seeking people. They may be composed, anonymous, spontaneous, adapted, arranged or assimilated. But all celebrate the heartbeat of God."

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 Cleveland's husband 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 Cleveland, from the point of her very first record on, is just a bonus.

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.

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,” Cleveland 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 Cleveland, 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,’” Cleveland 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. 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,” Cleveland 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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