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M.L. King: I Have A Dream

By LISA HENDERSON

The plight of Dr. Martin Luther King to remove all bonds of social injustice was revived soulfully, before an enthusiastic crowd at Massey Hall on November 26.

The York Catholic Community sponsored the National Black Touring Circuit Inc. to stage *I Have A Dream*, a tribute to the life and work of Dr. King.

The play, performed by a cast of seven — James Curt Bergwall, Lee Coward, Chequita Jackson, Herman Levern Jones, Bruce Strickland, Diane Weaver and Dwight Witherspoon — depicts the marches of blacks during the '50s and '60s toward the elimination of racial segregation and the acquisition of suffrage.

This self-sacrificing mission led by King was by no means accomplished without hardship and personal loss. The drama unfolds as a series of hardhitting events — the terrorization of family members, the bombing of his home and the murder of a friend to name a few — which give insight into the difficulty of his journey. The play makes it clear that determination and guts were the forces that scripted a new chapter in American history.

Co-directed by Woodie King Jr. and Lee Coward, *I Have A Dream*



combines speech and gospel music to relay emotion, atmosphere, and plot. The play is versatile in its approach, and brings into light the dual nature of King as both a political figure and a reverend. In addition, the gospel music illuminated the spiritual roots of King's beliefs.

Stark and simple, the set design enhanced the play's message. The design was comprised of three large screens, photographs from newspapers covering the Martin Luther King story, which complemented the action. Shots of street marches, segregated buses and a close-up portrait of King captured the spirit of the drama. The images also reinforced the reality of the phenomenon surrounding this martyr.

The title *I Have A Dream*, has been most appropriately selected. This famous speech contained the essence of this Civil Rights leader's ideals and moved many to sense the urgency and pertinence of his cause.

King's assassination in 1968 did not signal the end of the battle for universal equality. The symbolic gift of a red bouquet to his wife, in the play, not only foreshadows the brutality of his murder but, more importantly, evokes the eternal life of his Civil Rights movement.

His philosophy and ideology have bypassed the era in which they were born and serve today as model of greatness. *I Have A Dream* gives proof of this.

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Rosetta

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Bell Nubin, exchange and interweave phrases on "Daniel In The Lion's Den." Tharpe's upbeat guitar-playing (often verging on rock'n'roll-before-its time) is in the forefront on most of the album, and it sounds especially good when accompanied by Sammy Price's lively barrelhouse piano style, as on her original "How Far From God."

Tharpe's 1951 gospel wedding to former Inkspots manager Russell Morrison attracted more than 20,000 paying guests, but her lonely death 22 years later resulted in a far more modest funeral, attended mainly by her most loyal friends and followers (Marie Knight and Marion Williams sang, and The Dixie Hummingbirds were pall-bearers). Debilitated by a stroke and subsequent leg amputation in 1970, Tharpe slowed down considerably in her last years. In 1973, gospel historian Anthony Heilbut had scheduled studio time for Tharpe, but on the morning of the session, she fell into what would be a fatal coma. *Sincerely, Sister Rosetta Tharpe* contains some of her final recordings: 1968's "Savior, Don't Pass Me By," with heavy organ accompaniment, and two solo (Tharpe's voice and guitar) cuts from a 1969 concert in Paris's Hot Club — "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child" and a breathtaking version of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot." These three songs feature a gravelly-voiced Tharpe, still able to wrench emotion with every syllable, still able to sustain notes and twist them inside out.

Sincerely is a must-buy for any gospel or jazz vocals enthusiast. So many gospel albums from the '50s and '60s are frustratingly devoid of session dates and even personnel listings (it's extremely common to find quartet albums that don't list the group's members!); the Rosetta Records series is a well-annotated change-of-pace, with a packaging that greatly enhances the listening experience. And Tharpe, whose life and work are so fascinating, is the perfect artist to present in such a fashion.

A final note to those interested in following up on Tharpe: Anthony Heilbut's excellent *Gospel Sound* (reprinted by Limelight Editions in 1985) contains about a dozen pages on the life and career of this largely overlooked performer.

Bro. Stu hosts The Upper Room every Monday from 8-9 p.m. on CHRY 105.5 FM