Mass Choirs

Bishop Blake leads the West Angeles Mass Choir.

MAKING NOISE ON TODAY'S MUSIC CHARTS

Samantha Dixon

A revolution is going on in the world of inspirational music: mass choirs have been stealthily and consistently moving both up the charts and off the shelves in huge numbers. One of the top-selling mass choirs instrumental (literally) in leading the charge of this trend is the **West Angeles COGIC Mass Choir** (also known as West Angeles Mass Choir) based in Los Angeles, California.

Under **Bishop Charles E. Blake's** impressive vision and the extensive experience of **Director of Music and Worship Arts Ministry/Executive Director Jason White**, the West Angeles Mass Choir is internationally recognized as having helped to change and formalize the entire sound of urban praise and worship with its groundbreaking musical approach and method. In 2009, it was nominated for both a Grammy award and a Stellar Award for its fifth album ***No Limit***. Its hit single **"Lord Prepare Me"** broke into the Top 10 charts and made it all the way to No. 3.

To find out more about this growing phenomenon that is positively impacting urban music, *The Frequency* went straight to the source and sat down with Jason White to gain deeper insight into the secrets of the West Angeles Mass Choir's individual success that is being replicated by mass choirs across the country. Although right in the middle of preparing for a 2011 record, Jason took the time to break down the facts regarding the mass appeal that his mass choir and others like it are experiencing in the industry.

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Jason began our conversation by making it clear that a collective is only as strong as its leadership. As the Director of Music and Worship Arts for the past four years, he humbly stated, "The vision that has propelled us this far is really as a result of Bishop Blake's heart for the songs of God. He had a hope and goal for the music of our mass choir that the people listening would worship and lift their hands and connect with their God."

A student of music himself, Bishop Blake was recently appointed the Presiding Bishop of the **Worldwide Church of God in Christ**, representing 7 million members worldwide, and he is the Head Pastor of the West Angeles Church of God in Christ with a membership of over 24,000. Combine these colossal numbers with Jason White's booming industry background, and it is no wonder the West Angeles Mass Choir is experiencing such major massive appeal to a worldwide audience.

If you are a fan, follower, or contributor to the world of inspirational music in any way, you have heard the works of Jason White. One of the industry's foremost musician-producers, he's played the piano and produced for countless artists including **Donnie McClurkin**, **Mary Mary**, **Bishop T.D. Jakes**, **Kim Burrell**, **Karen Clark-Sheard**, **Dorinda Clark-Cole**, **Daryl Coley**, **Judith McAllister**, **Soul Seekers**, **Norman Hutchins**, **Alvin Slaughter**, and **Kurt Carr**, just to name a few.

During the past twenty-plus years, the West Angeles Mass Choir has recorded a number of albums including three volumes of ***Saints in Praise*** that have become a collector's item for true connoisseurs of praise and worship music. Jason shared the choir's history stating, "We started in the early '90s with *Saints in Praise 1*, which really sort of revolutionized praise and worship in the black church by allowing the congregation to be heard singing along on the recordings. Those records were produced by **Patrick Henderson**, and those records really transformed the black praise and worship sound. We did three volumes of that. Our fourth record was ***Lift Your Hands***, and our fifth and most recent album ***No Limit*** was nominated for both a Grammy and a Stellar Award in 2009."

So what was the sound of mass choirs before the revolution ushered in by the West Angeles Mass Choir? Jason explained, "Before those records, worship was basically like a concert or a performance, where people would sit back and watch choirs sing in rifts, runs, and modulations. People were not really interactive in terms of lifting their hands and singing and different things. It was more like a spectator situation. The heart of our Pastor Bishop Blake really felt that God wanted his people to be more engaged in the experience, in the worship. So Bishop Blake wanted a record that would give the song back to the people. He wanted a worship record that would be simplified with simple music, simple melodies, and simple lyrics, but that was really filled with depth."

Jason continued, "The goal was for the music to be simple enough for people to be able to sing along the second time around, so they could personally connect with God, instead of merely watching the choir sing without personally engaging in the experience." Prior to this new spin on the sound, the black church was used to a more-repetitious style song of praise. Jason shared, "This is why I guess you could say we were the trailblazers, as this format really caught on and remains one of the most popular styles for mass choirs to use today. It was charismatic as well as universal and has touched many different lives and many different entities and markets."

When asked about the undisputable impact this format is currently having on urban charts, Jason said he thinks "choir music is catching on for a few different reasons. Choirs today are going deeper in their messages in terms of encouragement and what the content they are singing is about. When glorifying God, choirs are really speaking to people's needs, and

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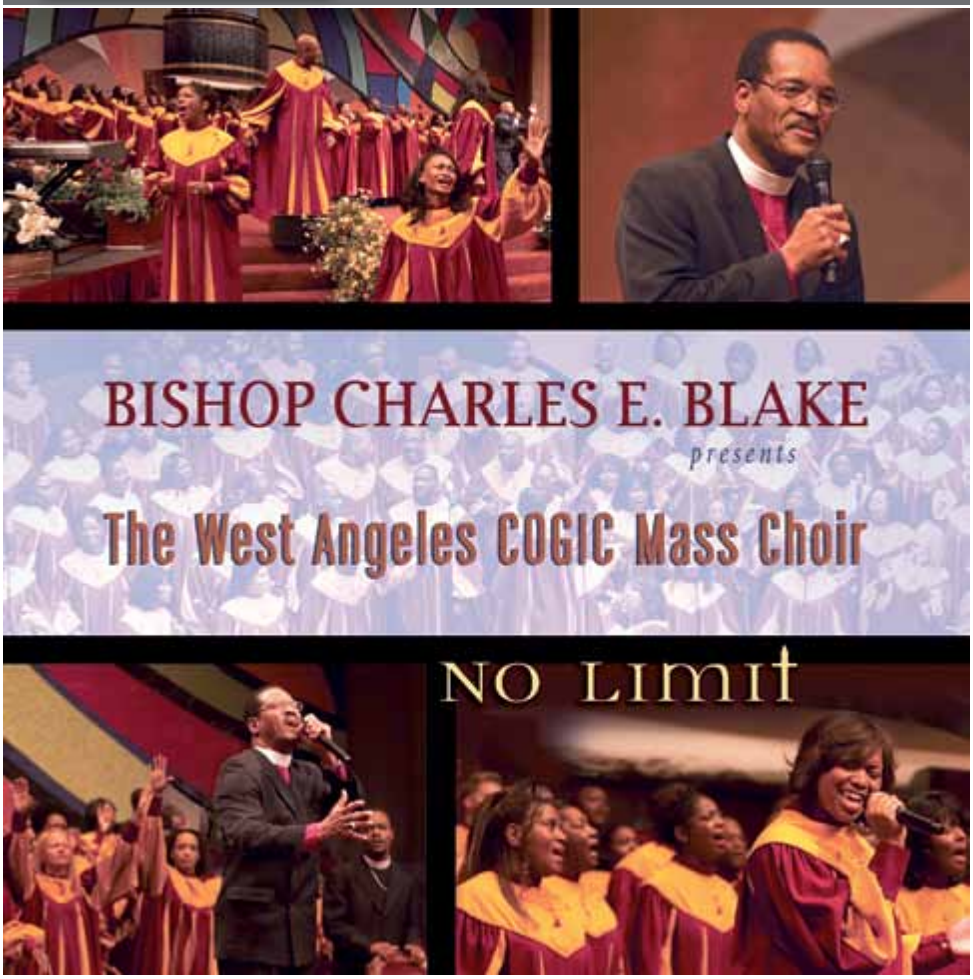

people can sing along. You know they want to sing while driving down the street in their car as well as in the midnight hour. They want to have something that can touch them. This is why I think choirs today are really coming on the scene because they are speaking to that need."

According to Jason, in addition to the instrumentation, unity is one of the most important elements of a mass choir's success: "When you walk into a church, the choir is usually the first thing people see. They are rocking together, moving together, clapping together, and that is something people want to be a part of. They represent a unified front and gathering that people are able to join along with, and so it is definitely catching on."

With this imagery of unity being crucial to the success of a mass choir's brand, it is of utmost importance for the music director to harness diverse individuals and talents and bring them together on one accord. To accomplish this feat for his West Angeles Mass Choir, Jason says he "truly speaks life" and believes that "as a director, you have to constantly challenge people to let them know that we are workers together in unity for the up-building of the Kingdom as well as ministering to one another." Most of all, Jason believes that, as the Book of Hebrews says, "God won't forget your labor of love." He tells his choir, "The time you are giving to rehearsal and the nights of preparation, sometimes two and three hours at a time, multiple times a week, is really not unto the director or unto the church, but it is really that labor of love unto God."

Jason reminds them that although sometimes the director may not remember, or even if the pastor never remembers, God always remembers. He believes "this reminder helps unify a mass choir more than any other encouragement because it is based on scripture which makes it true. *A mass choir is one*. It is the idea that I am my brother's keeper. I am my sister's keeper. And we are working together in the up-building of the Kingdom of God. And most of all, God will not forget you. Your labor is unto a church, but the ultimate labor is unto your Lord and your Savior, which is the real reason for doing what we all do: glorifying God."

Bishop Charles and Mae Blake and the West Angeles Cathedral

WEST ANGELES MASS CHOIR

- Church services are streamed live every Sunday at 8 AM and 11 AM (PST); www.westa.org
- ***No Limit*** CD in stores now
  - Distributed by EMI Gospel
  - Debuted at No. 2 on Billboard Gospel Chart