

There's a new choir around that's setting the airwaves on fire, receiving hit radio exposure. According to its producers, the sound is not a new one but has roots which go all the way back to Africa, yet has a freshness that says 1991 all over it.

But there are some who suggest that it is the Devil's music dressed up as Gospel, or that it is merely Gospel-ized pop. The controversy has been stirred by the group's association with hit-maker producers Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis.

Sounds of Blackness is the name of the controversial Minneapolis-based group whose debut album, *The Evolution of Gospel*, was released this summer and it has been causing a stir throughout the nation.

Currently, Sounds of Blackness is on tour with soul crooner Luther Vandross, for whom it is the opening act. The result is a pop soul concert with strong spiritual overtones.

According to producer and musical director Gary Hines, "The group appears to have tapped into a spiritual need present in society. We knew all along that people were hungry for positive messages and images that were from the Black perspective. And we felt that there would be the kind of overwhelming response that the album has received."

Hines reports that all the group's members are Christians. Asked about the group performing secular material, he responds, "We reject calling non-Gospel forms of Black music the Devil's music. We see that as a vestige of slavery where anything

Black was bad or associated with the Devil. To the contrary, we proudly perform the full range of music that we as a people have been blessed with."

## SOUNDS OF BLACKNESS

### Is It Gospel, or What?

by David Thomas

The liner notes to the album contain the following statement, "Since our inception two decades ago, we have endeavored to expose people of all backgrounds to the beauty, complexity and diversity of Black music. We shall continue to do so, particularly until African-American music and musicians receive full credit, recognition, exposure, remuneration, and opportunities proportionate to our contributions to American and world music and culture."

In 1971, Gary assumed the directorship of the Macalester College Black Choir in St. Paul and this evolved over time into Sounds of Blackness. "We named ourselves Sounds of Blackness due to the repertoire we performed. I wanted to have a group that encompasses the full family of Afro-American musics: jazz, gospel, rock, rhythm and

blues, and so on."

As members of the choir graduated and moved away, it narrowed down from an 80-voice choir to its current size of 30 singers. Originally the group performed with a simple rhythm section; however, during the '80s the group began adding to its instrumental section until now it includes a full 14-piece orchestra.

Regarding the relationship between Sounds of Blackness and the hit-making team of Terry Lewis and Jimmy Jam, Hines relates, "Our families have known one another for a number of years. In fact, during the early '70s, the Sounds used to perform on the same bills as the Flyte Tyme Band (a stage band in which Lewis and Jam used to perform).

"Throughout the years, they would always come to the Sounds' productions whenever we would perform in Minneapolis." Finally, during the fall of '88, Jam and Lewis approached the group about doing background vocals for a Christmas album by Alexander O'Neal.

This led to the group being used to do background vocals for Janet Jackson's huge *Rhythm Nation* album. "Jim and Terry brought Janet to see one of the group's productions back in January of '89, and she was so excited by the show that she told them, 'We've got to hurry up and get them signed so we can get the message out there.'"

*The Evolution of Gospel* highlights the vocal talents of Ann Bennet Nesby on a majority of the tunes, including the hit song "Optimistic."

"I've known Ann for almost 20 years,"

