

Singing from the Heart

Martha Munizzi never expected to blaze any trails in gospel music, but her soulful style of worship is BREAKING DOWN RACIAL BARRIERS between black and white Christians.

Her voice has a deep, soulful quality. There is nothing canned or prepackaged in her delivery. When Martha Munizzi sings, it's as if the words are being pulled out of a dark well and poured onto thirsty ground.

"Because of who You are I give You glory / Because of who You are I give You praise / Because of who You are I will lift my voice and say / Lord, I worship You because of who You are."

That song, "Because of Who You Are," Munizzi's most famous to date, captures the essence of worship and draws listeners into a place of raw intimacy with God.

"I started singing 'Because of Who You Are' as I was washing my kids' hair while they were taking baths. [My husband and I] had been talking about how we don't praise God for what He gives us but because of who He is. So I thought, Who is He?"

After studying the meanings of God's biblical names over the next few weeks, she put some in the song. "My choir loved it. I didn't think of it as being anything but a song for my choir to sing. But it just took off."

The popular tune, penned in 1996 and now sung in churches around the world, also captures the essence of this vivacious singer who grew up around racist attitudes. Munizzi's soulful style of praise and worship has become a surprising hit among fans of black gospel music. Her albums regularly top the

gospel charts, and songs such as “Glorious” are played frequently on gospel radio stations.

Although Andraé Crouch, Fred Hammond and Stevie Wonder are among her favorite songwriters, Munizzi says she never set out to draw African-American listeners. “I never tried to sing or sound a certain way,” she says. “I wouldn’t even know how to do that. I just always wanted to sing better and to sing from my heart.”

Touching the Heart and Soul

Today Munizzi is helping to tear down racial divides in the body of Christ. For the last two years she’s won Stellar Awards, which traditionally have recognized the achievements of African-Americans in gospel music. She received Stellers for New Artist of the Year in 2005 and Special Event CD in 2006 for her Christmas album, When He Came. The Best Traditional Soul Gospel Album Grammy nomination that she received this year for Say the Name—the first of her four CDs to date—is further indication that she is recognized as a viable gospel singer.

Munizzi was also selected to play herself and perform in The Gospel, the 2005 major motion picture about a successful, young R&B singer who has an unexpected homecoming when his father, a bishop, becomes ill and can no longer lead his church.

“They could have picked anybody but ... for her to be alongside Yolanda Adams and Donnie McClurkin ... it was an incredible compliment,” says Dan Munizzi, Martha’s husband of 18 years and her manager and producer. “It made a huge statement about

how the gospel community is embracing Martha.”

According to Bil Carpenter, music journalist and author of *Uncolored Days: The Gospel Music Encyclopedia* (2005), her acceptance could be due in part to timing. He notes that a shift occurring beneath the surface of gospel music is more inclusive of new artists.

“I wonder if a Martha Munizzi could have been successful in black gospel 10 years ago,” Carpenter says. “The black church has always had sort of reverse racial hostility towards white gospel singers. By and large, they have never given much credence to the authenticity of white Christians as gospel singers.

“But ... a new generation of people who don’t have the same rigid racial hostilities of their foreparents isn’t as hung up on the right or wrong of a white person singing black gospel music,” he explains. “Angelo & Veronica were very popular in black churches a decade ago but couldn’t get a black gospel radio hit. Same thing with Jon Gibson, who sounded similar to Stevie Wonder.”

Carpenter points out the primary difference between then and now. “Gospel radio’s new generation is giving white gospel artists a chance to be heard, and the audience is supporting them,” he says.

Danny McGuffey, chief marketing officer at Integrity Media, which is distributing Munizzi’s music now, points to Munizzi’s sound as key to her appeal.

“Martha’s got soul,” he says. “She’s got what all the R&B

greats have—she can wail! And she identifies with the black church like nobody I've seen. When you see and hear her perform, stylistically you get it.”

On the Gospel Road

All this is happening to a Southern woman who was raised amid her white relatives' racial prejudice toward blacks. Her grandparents wouldn't allow The Cosby Show to be seen on their television. When black Christian vocalist Larnelle Harris performed at the church Munizzi's uncle attended, her grandfather refused to go.

Munizzi didn't grow up singing black gospel music. She was taught the Southern brand. Her parents were traveling evangelists for the Assemblies of God. Along with their three young girls, they were a family singing group as well.

“In those days we traveled by car, and since we had all those hours together, we sang,” recalls her mother, Faith Frederick, who now co-directs Faith Christian University in Orlando, Florida.

When her parents first took root in Orlando to plant a church, they encouraged their girls to attend the midweek youth group gatherings at booming Calvary Assembly of God.

There Martha and her twin, Mary, became part of a singing group, Testament, which featured contemporary Christian-style music. They traveled the state performing at Assemblies of God youth conventions.

Dan was the group's bass player. His first impression of Martha was marked by "how fun she was ... and how genuine." They fell in love, and after they married, they got involved in leading worship in local churches. Because the churches were predominantly attended by African-Americans, they began a change of course.

"Since we wanted the music to be attractive to the people coming, and we wanted to relate, we started learning more and more Fred Hammond and Kirk Franklin-type music," Dan explains.

Martha's songwriting abilities bloomed after she and Dan joined the worship ministry at Faith World, then a new church in Orlando that grew from 12 people who met in a living room to thousands who attend the church's several Sunday services. Martha led worship there for eight years, being paid as staff only the last year. Dan was general manager of the church's recording studio and marveled at Martha's progression.

"A few times, right in the middle of a worship service, Martha would start writing a new song and singing it, and we didn't have it on tape. So I said, 'From now on we're always going to tape the services in case something like that happens.'"

Those recordings would be key to the next chapter of their lives. Martha says her only goal had been to build the church choir, but a conversation with the church's pastor, Clint Brown, changed that.

"He said, 'I just really feel like your season is done here and you need to step out,'" Martha recalls. "It was like a curtain opened and the angels were singing. I thought, Why didn't I see that? All at the same time I was sad and scared

and full of hope.”

A New Day

To start, the Munizzis tried going solo. They had two bookings, six months apart. “It was dumb,” Martha says.

Still, they left Faith World with publishing rights on Martha’s songs, and by putting together 10 songs recorded live with the vibrant choir, they independently published Say the Name under their new Martha Munizzi Music label.

Diligent research and savvy advice helped them dodge mistakes that could have ended their green venture. Dan contacted people behind the scenes in the music business and asked a lot of questions.

When the couple heard that Donnie McClurkin was coming to town, Dan called and offered to have Martha sing free of charge at McClurkin’s concert. She was welcomed and was taken by surprise when she learned that McClurkin was familiar with her songs.

After the service, the Munizzis sat with McClurkin’s manager, Roger Holmes, for two hours and “picked his brain.” He steered them away from signing a contract that involved anything outside of distributing.

They took to the road and found that most of their bookings were coming from churches with African-American congregations. That led to another pivotal decision for the couple—they opted to categorize their music as gospel.

"It's the best decision we ever made because we would have gotten lost in [contemporary] Christian music," Martha says.

The Best Is Yet to Come, Munizzi's second album, was recorded live in 2002 at Lakewood Church in Houston in collaboration with Israel Houghton and New Breed Productions.

"We didn't have nearly enough rehearsal," Martha said. "We needed about two more weeks. But the night of the recording, God showed up and it was powerful. I sang and played with people I'd never sang and played with before, and the connections were awesome."

An unsolicited TV promotion made sales skyrocket after Martha was a guest on Juanita Bynum's Weapons of Power show on Trinity Broadcasting Network.

"She had heard the song Israel and I wrote, 'God Is Here,' and it just blessed her in her prayer time," Martha says. "She played it on the air like 15 times in a row."

Bynum invited Martha on her program the next week. "She kept saying to the audience, 'You gotta go buy this CD.' We had to hire somebody just to answer the phone," Martha says. "It was nonstop crazy all day long for about two weeks."

TV exposure came from a secular source as well. BET played the live video of The Best Is Yet to Come for an hour on several Sundays. "We knew when it was on because our phone would not stop ringing," Martha adds.

Offers started pouring in, but not all of them were appealing. "If I were to tell you about or show you some of the contracts we were offered ... they're laughable," Dan says. "Some basically were that they own you and everything you do for life."

The Munizzis' contract with Integrity Media allows the couple more creative control over their final products. It includes putting pre-released singles from her new album, *No Limits Live*, on iTunes and providing a ring tone under the Inspiration category with every major cell-phone carrier.

The Power of Praise

The Munizzis work today from their split-level house near Orlando that includes accommodations for their office and a homeschool area for their three children, Danielle, 13; Nicole, 10; and Nathan, 8. Martha was homeschooled herself when her parents were evangelists and sees the importance of including them. "We want our children with us so they're a part of what we're doing."

For three weeks in March the Munizzi family toured the country on a rented tour bus to promote *No Limits*. It was recorded live in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, at Bethany World Prayer Center. The tour included stopping in 15 major cities across the country for concerts, and radio and TV appearances. In New York on March 12 Martha was the main host of the Sunday morning gospel show on the popular urban station KISS-FM. On March 16 she performed with CeCe Winans at the Apollo Theater.

Though Martha's musical inspirations include Winans as well as Yolanda Adams and Kirk Franklin, she believes the music styles

of all races should be reflected through worship.

“When I first wrote a song with a Latin feel, ‘Blessed Be the Lord,’ we sang it in Spanish, and people came out of the woodwork that I didn’t even know were there. Our choir started growing. People that were sitting in the back starting sitting in the front.

“It’s a responsibility, as much as we can, to represent all the people in our church,” she explains. “Not just by race. You’ve got older people that love the old classics as well.”

Munizzi believes that stylistically, worship music needs to fulfill needs. “Churches should reflect their town, their city, their culture,” she says. “Praise and worship should be an eclectic blend of the sounds of the races and cultures.”

Accommodating a variety of musical tastes seems natural to this fun and relatable blonde who loves to watch cooking shows and Gilmore Girls, shops from catalogs, and is known to eat Mexican food at every meal. She calls herself “spontaneous,” which translates into packing at 2 a.m. to leave town at 6 a.m. She’s had fun weaving into her songs everything from Diana Ross’ disco hit, “I’m Coming Out,” to Caribbean beats to a medley of the Gaither classic, “Jesus, There’s Something About That Name.”

But ask her more of what she believes about her music and its ministry, and it becomes evident that, fun included, she takes it seriously. “One of the main Scriptures for me, and I think for worship ministry in general, is Psalm 8:2. That’s my whole reason for doing what I do, why worship and praise is so key.

“The verse says that ‘from the lips of children and infants You have ordained praise because of Your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger.’ Some translations say that God ordained praise as a ‘strength’ to still the enemy.

“That’s one of the missing links in our church growth—our praise has power,” she adds. “Our worship is a weapon. When we understand that, you don’t have to be depressed, you don’t have to lack joy.

“Praise and worship takes you out of the realm of the flesh and puts you into the realm of the Spirit. It paralyzes the enemy. That’s what I encourage people to do and what I fight in my own life. When I’m feeling a little melancholy or defeated, I have to remember and practice this psalm.”

Munizzi encourages her audiences not to allow fear to hold them back from experiencing God. Whether the fear stems from differences in denominations, doctrines or races, she believes surrendering to God is the ultimate answer to removing barriers in individuals and in the body of Christ.

“Praise and worship is nondenominational. The presence of God has nothing to do with race, creed or denomination. My message to those who are holding back because they don’t understand some reactions, like raising your hands, crying or clapping, is don’t be afraid. Instead, seek God and understand the scriptural basis for these actions in worship.

“When you surrender yourself in worship before God, you become exposed. Praise and worship strips you of all that you are and all that you are worried about. It lets God be who He is.”

Munizzi says her primary goal is not to unify the races but to unify hearts. “The more we get to know each other, we find out we’re not that different. We have so much to offer each other. In gospel music, we segregate still. But those walls are coming down.”

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