

The Diva Is a Preacher

She has wowed audiences worldwide. But Grammy-winning gospel artist Shirley Caesar also is a pastor with a passion to minister to her local community.

The petite bundle of energy wearing the pastoral robe has the microphone, and the crowd can't sit still. She just sang the title cut from her latest album, *You Can Make It*, a disc that in February earned this gospel diva her 11th Grammy award. The song's a mid-tempo ballad, but the audience is going wild. They can't help it—the woman with the microphone is egging them on.

"You drove past the hospital this morning [instead of being admitted]—that's why you ought to bless the Lord! Aren't you glad that grave they're digging right now isn't being dug for you? That's why you ought to bless the Lord!"

After more than 30 albums and 50 years in music ministry, Shirley Caesar is used to bringing audiences to their feet. But this group of 200 or so worshipers isn't just another crowd. They're the congregation of Mount Calvary Word of Faith Church, the Pentecostal church she pastors in a depressed region of Raleigh, North Carolina.

Caesar, 62, begins to calm down, and the crowd almost sits, but not before she leads them into another triumphant shout that rocks the church's structure. This foot-stomping good time is the stuff of old-fashioned Pentecostal church. Her sermon brings more people to their feet.

"Can I get a witness? God can take a pimp and clean him up and make a preacher out of him. God can take a prostitute and

clean up her make a church mother out of her. God can take a homosexual him on a street called straight.”

Caesar is beginning to sing her sermon. It’s the same throaty voice that wowed former presidents Bill Clinton and George Bush when she sang at the White House.

But it’s not just her delivery that has this crowd on their feet. Caesar moves her own size 7 feet in a fervent dance, as if the lives of her members depended on her beating a hole in the floor.

“There is something in all of us that God wants to use. All of my young people, did you know I got saved when I was 12 years old? Because God saw something that He wanted to use in me. There’s something in all of you that God wants to use.”

One might wonder what this modern-day music legend is doing in a place like this, in a rickety church with peeling white paint. But it’s not the outside of the church that keeps her coming back.

She says the Lord appointed her to pastor this congregation, and her heart bleeds for people in need. God gave her a voice that is shaking hearts, a shout that is shaking walls and a love for people that is changing the world around her one life at a time.

The Little Lady With a Big Voice

It’s a Saturday afternoon at Caesar’s house, located in an upscale community in Durham, North Carolina. Caesar returned

this morning from Las Vegas where she taped a broadcast of the Trinity Broadcasting Network's Praise the Lord show. She's still wearing her semi-formal suit, but her high heels have been replaced with slippers, and she's munching on some nuts.

She sits on a plush white sofa, but it's tough for her to keep still. Two

phones ring frequently during her conversation with Charisma. At one point she stops to conduct another interview by phone.

But when the room falls quiet again, she begins to muse about needing to visit the sick mothers in her church and about her vision for the ministry she directs.

Mount Calvary Word of Faith's 300-seat sanctuary can't hold the 500 people who regularly attend on Sundays. The church's new 1,500-seat facility is being built on 10 acres of land five minutes from the current property.

"[My vision] is that we would be community-involved. I want to bring in street people and clean them up," she says. "I want an one of the beauticians in the church will fix the women's hair. I want a room full of clothes where they can just go in and pick-choose and refuse-with shoes and dresses, and get them ready for service.

"I want a room that is stocked with canned we could be a blessing to them, not just send them back empty-handed. We're not going to send them back empty-hearted-don't send them back empty-handed."

She wants a school and a nursery, too, and would build a home for the elderly if the insurance weren't so expensive.

"I've got a heart for people," she says. "I believe the main prerequisites for being a pastor is that you love people. Nobody is going to really care for you like your pastor if that pastor is worth his salt."

But this pastor also is an internationally renowned singer who at press time had won 17 Dove awards and 12 Stellar awards in addition to her 11 Grammys. Those don't include a plethora of other accolades, including a 1989 NAACP Image Award and a 1999 Trumpet Award, or the fact that she contributed to four movie soundtracks and appeared in two feature films, spoke before the U.S. Treasury in 1992 about the evolution of gospel music, and in 1989 became the first female gospel artist to perform at Harvard University.

"When I see her perform live, to me, it's as if she's performing as if it's the last performance she'll have!" says longtime producer Bubba Smith. "She's totally in the moment, totally connecting with the audience." The public calls her a diva, but she herself doesn't claim the title. She admits that her acclaim has surprised her, although she says ministering through music is part of what she calls a "chosenness" on her life, and she makes no apologies for her success.

"Everybody does not have the same calling or the same gift," Caesar says. "I mix my preaching and my singing together, and I just knew God had chosen me to do the kind of singing I do."

The 10th of 13 children, Caesar began singing at age 8 in the local Mount Calvary Holy church her family attended. Her father died when she was 6, leaving her mother, though a semi-invalid, to rear the family alone. Caesar's popularity locally as a little lady—she stands 5 feet 2 inches tall—with a big

voice garnered singing engagements for her at local churches.

Because she was raised in church, gospel music was all she knew. She didn't become a Christian until she was 12, and the next year she began singing at revival meetings.

Yet it was five years later, in 1957, that Caesar says she received the call to minister. She was taking a college typing course and suddenly heard the voice of the Lord. At the time, she wasn't certain what she heard, but when she returned home she heard the Lord call her to ministry as He did the prophet Jeremiah.

"I listened closer, and the words became quite clear to me," she wrote in her book *The Lady, the Melody and the Word* (Thomas Nelson). "Behold I have called you, and I have ordained you from your mother's womb to preach the did not fully understand what those words meant at the moment, but I interpreted them to mean God was calling me to preach as well as to sing. I did not feel torn to choose between the two, and I really can't say which I prefer."

The next year, Caesar got her big break when she began traveling with the popular gospel group the Caravans, led by Albertina Walker. Caesar was convinced the trio needed a third background vocalist to achieve three-part harmony. After hearing Caesar sing, Walker agreed, and Caesar spent eight years with the Caravans before going solo in 1966.

Though bumpy initially, Caesar's musical career quickly began to blossom. She recorded her first solo album, *I'll Go*, in 1967 and was frequently invited to preach at revival services. In 1971 she won her first Grammy for her song "Put Your Hand

in the Hand of the Man From Galilee.”

Caesar would soon become known as “The First Lady of Gospel Music,” and her career would take a quantum leap. But the same year, God challenged her to take her ministry to the next level.

Feeding God's Sheep

On Thanksgiving Day that year, she was on a concert tour through Florida and was having dinner with friends. Her food prepared, Caesar sat down to eat.

“I was watching the news, and right there in our neighboring state [Tennessee] there were little boys and girls with pot bellies just like in Africa somewhere, dying of starvation. God spoke to my spirit and said, ‘Feed my sheep.’ I said, ‘Lord, I’m doing that.’

“I started to eat, and the Lord said it again, ‘Feed my sheep.’ I thought that conducting revivals and singing, that I was doing this.

“When I got home, I mentioned it to Mama. Mama said to me, ‘Well, maybe the Lord is talking about natural food.’ I said, ‘Mama, how am I going to feed all these people?’ She said, ‘You can’t help everybody, but you can help somebody.’”

She began the Shirley Caesar Outreach Ministries that year and provided canned goods for needy families at Christmastime. Every year since she has offered food and financial assistance

to her local community by raising money through special fund-raising concerts.

Last year's event assembled singers Lou Rawls, Gladys Knight and others, and Caesar is hoping to make the events more elaborate in the future. Her next fund-raiser is July 10-13.

"I can count the times on one hand that we've had to turn somebody down. And it all happened because of that one dream, where God said, 'Feed My sheep.' This is what the ministry's about."

In June 1983 she married Bishop Harold Williams, the soft-spoken presiding bishop of her denomination. "I was drawn to his kindness, his meekness," she says. "I wanted someone I could depend on have to fend and fight for myself. Now instead of being one, there are two of us who make up one."

Williams has endured being called "Mr. Caesar" countless times, but he is unfazed by it. "I want her to succeed," he says. "I knew who she was when I asked her to marry me. She sings when she wants to, there are no restrictions. When I have to go, I go, there are no restrictions. We share our ministries."

In 1987, Caesar began a four-year term on the Durham City Council. She wanted to provide affordable housing for the elderly, decrease unemployment and foster business in downtown Durham. But before her term expired, God showed her another way to help her community.

It was in 1990, and Mount Calvary had dwindled to 17 members. Its pastor, Mother Elizabeth Lewis, who also pastored another

church in Richmond, Virginia, had become ill. Caesar says God told her then that she would pastor the church.

The bishops, however, decided to appoint the church to another pastor, Deborah Yelverton. Caesar told them Yelverton would say no.

“I told them, ‘You can ask her, but she’s going to say no.’ They said, ‘How do you know?’ I said, ‘Because the Lord has told me to do it.’ And sure enough, she said no. Now Deborah is pastor of her father’s church. The Lord had it fixed when He sent me to Raleigh.”

Caesar believes Pentecostals are more accepting of women in ministry leadership than other groups. But she admits that she has not always been well-received. A church in Newark, New Jersey, refused to allow her to preach from the pulpit and instead asked her to preach from behind a table on the floor. At first she wouldn’t, but she says God changed her mind.

“If Jesus could preach from an old ship, if He could use a mountainside as a pulpit, I could use a table,” Caesar says. “So I laid that put my Bible on the table and gave them what the Lord had given me.”

Fist of Iron, Heart of Gold

Since Caesar was appointed pastor of Mount Calvary, the congregation of 17 has grown to 500 members. But at the beginning of her pastorate, the church needed strengthening, she says.

“I needed to see a broken people put back together again. I needed them to see something they had never seen for years and years—that God can pack this little church.”

Packing a church isn't too tough for Shirley Caesar the gospel artist. But Shirley Caesar the pastor is known more by her love than her music.

“[Pastor Caesar] inspired me. She really took me by the hand,” says evangelist Shirley Jones, a Mount Calvary member since 1995. The 45-year-old mother of three is referring to her divorce, when she lost custody of her children. When she heard Caesar sing “Keep Patiently Waiting,” it seemed as if the song was written just for her.

“I felt like the burden of the world was on my shoulders,” Jones says. “It's hard, especially during the holidays. Nobody wants their family broken up.”

Caesar took Jones under her wing and encouraged her not to give up.

“I felt like, ‘Who am I to share [Christ] with someone else as broken as I am?’” Jones recalls.

But Caesar had encouraged her: “When He breaks you, He remakes you. And I can feel the pieces coming back together again.”

Though strong in her longing to help people, Caesar confides that she's not always confident in her ability to preach.

"I 'm a better singer than I am a preacher," she observes. "I'm more comfortable singing than preaching. I'm not putting my preaching down. [But] when I go out on stage, I mean business. I let the devil know I'm coming after [him] tooth and nail."

"On Sunday morning when I preach, a lot of times when I prepare the message, self tells me: 'You know this is not the word for the morning,' or, 'You know you're not ready.' The devil just says a lot of things to your mind. And that's the time when I go into the pulpit, and the Lord really blesses the Word."

Williams describes her as a strong pastor with an iron fist but a heart of gold.

"Shirley loves people. They can put security guards around her [at concerts]. It is imperative many times for her not to stop, just to wave and say hi. She will pull away from the guards. She loves people."

Williams says Mount Calvary Holy Churches of America has a long tradition of putting women in ministry leadership. Williams' mother and late wife were ministers in the church. And he says the founder, Bishop Brumfield Johnson, whom Williams succeeded, appointed women to positions as pastors, although he didn't believe women should be bishops.

"Our bishop was for women not women bishops. But he said to me before he passed: 'Son, stand on my shoulders, and you'll be able to see further over the wall than I can see.'

"So after a while, get on in the life of the church, there are

certain revelations God reveals, and we see there is time for changes. And all churches go through that.

“There is a time when you have to take a stand and say that we were wrong in this, but now we’re going to do it this way to carry the church along.”

Formerly a pastor in Baltimore, Williams now serves as Caesar’s co-pastor, which she welcomes. He supports her, she says, helping to “hold up her arms” as she ministers.

“If Bishop Williams had not been there I would not have been able to go on [the Sisters in the Spirit concert] tour. Some Sundays I was able to come back home and be there.

“[But] it was hard to sing on Saturday night, then get up early on Sunday morning, catch a plane, fly home and preach. Then 2 o’clock or 3 o’clock, fly right back out and sing again that night. After doing that so much, I believe it takes at least 10 years off your life.”

More and more, she says, she’s focusing her attention on her church. But she will continue to wear many hats. She has her own record label, Shu-Bell Music, and will star in a feature film next year, Sunday Morning.

The label’s first recording will be a collection of Caesar’s best-known songs, featuring Donnie McClurkin, Vickie Winans, Albertina Walker, Juanita Bynum and others. Caesar also will release a duets album with mainstream artists Gladys Knight, Patti LaBelle, Mary J. Blige and Lou Rawls.

Though she is known as a traditional gospel artist, she says she tries to stay current with the musical trends. Producer Bubba Smith says Caesar is a big fan of Kirk Franklin's. "He's reaching people she'll never reach, and she's reaching people he'll never reach," he says.

But Caesar does believe gospel music can go too far. "We must not forget who we're singing about," Caesar says. "We're singing about the Lord Jesus. And we must understand that we don't have to take our gospel that far to reach the young people.

"[Some young artists] think that they have to be so different, and instead of coming up with the right songs they put all of the motion from their body in it and a lot of flesh on parade, and the people can't hear the message from seeing the flesh."

A Pastor Worth Her Salt

The service has ended at Caesar's church, and she retreats to her small office to change. A homeless woman is waiting to speak with her. The woman is pregnant and has been having a rough time. Fifty dollars would help her get back on her feet.

Caesar and her staff get 10 to 20 requests like these on any given day, and there's no time to judge this woman's sincerity. The room falls quiet.

"Fifty dollars is easy," Caesar responds, "but you need something to eat." Caesar bundles up in her fur coat, and with several Mount Calvary members and the homeless woman in tow she departs for lunch at a nearby buffet.

The woman is shocked, but Caesar's staff isn't surprised. Whether she's singing a sermon or preaching a song, Caesar's goal is the same—to be used by God to change someone's life. She has wowed audiences worldwide. But Grammy-winning gospel artist Shirley Caesar also is a pastor with a passion to minister to her local community.

Gospel's Newest Sister Act

Mary Mary's potent R&B sound has catapulted them to success almost overnight—without compromising their straightforward message.

Erica Atkins opened her eyes long enough to see people crying and others falling backward under the power of the Holy Spirit. The display of God's touch upon the congregation humbled her. If the Creator of the universe could do all this when Atkins led worship, she was willing.

During another altar call at about the same time, a missionary spoke to Erica's sister, Tina Atkins Campbell.

"She said, 'God is going to use you to help people get delivered and draw closer to Him through singing,'" Tina recounts. "I really didn't want the responsibility, but if God calls you, you can only run for so long."

That was three years ago. Today, the sisters have bolted into the international mainstream music spotlight, calling themselves Mary Mary. Their debut release, *Thankful*, has gone gold.

And the Atkins sisters have reeled in a Grammy, a Soul Train Award and three Stellar awards. In the fall they toured with Shirley Caesar, Angélla Christie and Yolanda Adams in the Sisters in the Spirit concert tour.

“Mary Mary is the next step for gospel music,” says Teresa Hairston, publisher of Gospel Today magazine. “Mary Mary is the first gospel artist to sign with an urban [mainstream] label [for their first album]. This proves that secular labels will embrace gospel.

“The success of Mary open the door for other acts. They have shown that you do not have to compromise to be successful.”

Before forming Mary Mary, the Atkins sisters appeared in two gospel plays and sang backup for artists such as Brandy, Brian McKnight, Kenny Lattimore and Eric Benet. Eschewing stereotypes, Mary Mary taps a variety of styles in their own music, from funk and hip-hop to jazz and rock.

“Just call it ‘gospel according to Mary Mary,’” the sisters say in unison.

Their single “Shackles (Praise You),” originally penned for the Prince of Egypt soundtrack, climbed the Billboard R&B airplay and sales charts and endeared them with audiences in the church and beyond. Japanese fans flock to purchase their music.

“Mary Mary is the next big thing in gospel music,” says Kirk Franklin, himself a pioneering urban artist. “I pray that God will use them to do bigger and bigger things.”

Following in Franklin's footsteps, the Atkins sisters have catapulted into venues far beyond those that traditionally have been relegated to gospel singers. Mary Mary crosses cultural, racial and generational barriers. When in front of a mainstream crowd, they do not preach but let the lyrics pack the spiritual wallop.

"Mary Mary is an introduction to having a relationship with God. It is all about Jesus," Tina explains. "We want to plant a seed and make people start inquiring themselves."

This does not mean Mary Mary sings obliquely about "love" and "happiness." To the contrary, the songs on Thankful, most of which were written by the sisters and producer Warryn Campbell, make clear the case for Jesus, the Father and faith.

"We talk about natural situations or hardships in life when you feel like giving up, be it a relationship, a job or just life," Tina reflects. "Then we talk about faith in the midst of those situations. I think people can relate to it when we come at it like that."

Even the group's name is drawn from the Bible, representing two Marys Christ knew well—Mary Magdalene and His mother, Mary. Tina would be cast as the outgoing Mary Magdalene and Erica as the more reflective mother of Jesus, the sisters agree.

Growing up in Inglewood, California, the Atkinses were weaned on hallelujahs. On Sundays, Erica and Tina could usually be found at Evangelistic Church of God in Christ, soaking up the teaching of pastor Charles Lollis and singing in the choir led by their mother. But faith was not left at the sanctuary door.

"We brought it home," Erica continues. "My parents taught us to pray. My mother still ends every phone conversation with, 'Are you praying?' We hear it every day."

A self-described radical, Tina's hair has been almost as many colors as Dennis Rodman's.

"We like to let people know that Christians are not these boring, homely people who don't have a clue about fashion," Tina says. "If you go out with your collar up, holding your Bible and looking plain with no makeup, people will say, 'You're scaring me; get away.' People want to feel like you are reachable, accessible."

Some believe the sisters' ability to remain relevant is a key to their success.

"I call what they are doing 'right now gospel,'" says MC Hammer, who launched his own label recently with Jubilee Christian Center pastor Dick Bernal. "This is what a dying generation needs right now. In this generation right now Jesus has been accepted in the mainstream. Jesus is no longer in the closet."

Being relevant, however, does not mean compromising.

"We can't please everyone, but we are always asking ourselves if something we do or sing would be offensive," Tina says. "We sing gospel music to people who might not otherwise hear about Him, so we are going to make sure Mary Mary represents God."

Mary Mary is about much more than a hairstyle or even good

music. Erica tells of when God miraculously removed an orange-sized cyst from her ovary. Tina recounts when she survived a serious automobile crash without a scratch. They both tackle the issue of race head-on, shedding traditional labels.

“If you are white you sing contemporary Christian. If you are black you sing gospel,” Tina says. “This is terrible. I think we should just call it God’s music.”

In their short history, Mary Mary has managed not only to sing the words but also to live the lyrics that open their hit song “Shackles”: “Take the shackles off my feet so I can dance, I wanna praise You.”

Indeed, they are.

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