



Interview No. SAS4.10.02-2  
Murray Schmoke

Interviewer: Brendan Costigan  
Location: Baltimore, Maryland  
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Q: My name is Brendan Costigan. I'm a sophomore at Johns Hopkins University in the Baltimore's Black Community Music Project. Right now I'm interviewing Mr. Murray Schmoke. Mr. Schmoke, can you just say quickly what your musical interest is?

Schmoke: My musical interest is strictly in singing. I have been singing ever since — well, I can remember when my mother forced into the young people's choir in my church in Raleigh, North Carolina. So I've been singing a long time, starting off as a tenor, and when my voice changed, I reverted to bass.

Q: So you say you first started out in the church choir. You were prompted to do so by your mother. What path did your singing take after that?

Schmoke: After that I joined the high school choir, and that was under the direction of George Vanhoy Collins, who was a graduate of Hampton Institute, a very, very fine musician. He had been taught by a student in Hampton, who had been taught by R. Nathaniel Dett. The African American community owes R. Nathaniel Dett a great debt of gratitude for recording the spirituals that were brought into him by the young people that came from all parts of the United States.

Q: Okay. So after high school, what?

Schmoke: After high school, I went to Morehouse College, and there I joined the Morehouse College Glee Club. I sang in that for four years, and I was in the quartet for two years of that time. That was under the direction of Kemper Harold, and he was another very fine musician.

Q: That was the quartet or the glee club?

Schmoke: The glee club. The glee club, yeah, well, they were not, they were the same thing really. If you were in the glee club, you were part of the quartet.

Q: Okay.

Schmoke: Part of the quartet was part of the glee club.

Q: Okay. So at what point did you find yourself in Baltimore?

Schmoke: After graduation from Morehouse, I came to Baltimore looking for a job in research. My major was chemistry, and I did not particularly want to teach. I was looking for a job in research. I wanted to continue singing because that was my greatest hobby. So I immediately joined the church choir here at Douglas Memorial Community Church, and I continued singing.

Q: What year was that that you joined the choir?

Schmoke: 1950.

Q: Under whose direction was it at that time?

Schmoke: At that time that was Mrs. Evangeline Mitchell Caswell. She directed the choir. She was another good musician, but the choir needed really a director. So later on, Reverend Bascom, who was the pastor at the time, got Spencer Hammond, James Spencer Hammond to come and direct the church choir. Another fine musician.

Q: What did he play?

Schmoke: He played the organ and piano. He directed the church choir.

Q: Okay. Go ahead.

Schmoke: Then in 1956, I joined the Great Hymns Choir under the direction of Daniel Rideout. Daniel L. Rideout.

Q: So a little more about the Great Hymns Choir. What exactly was the Great Hymns Choir and who was Daniel Rideout?

Schmoke: Daniel Rideout was at that time secretary to Bishop Edgar Love. He was a preacher, but he was also a musician. And he had gone around to various churches. He was always called upon to preach at various churches, and he was disturbed by the way congregations sang hymns. He decided that he would form a choir that specialized only in singing hymns, and to demonstrate to churches and to church choirs that hymn singing could be beautiful. He had a very unique style of singing these hymns that made them quite exciting.

I was asked to join that choir by a neighbor of mine, Mrs. Naomi Hasty, who was already in the choir, and she kept prodding me to come to a rehearsal. I went to one rehearsal, and that was held at the Sharp Street Methodist Church, and I was hooked from then on. Dan Rideout, whom we affectionately called Uncle Dan, was just a fine person and just an excellent musician.

Q: You said that Uncle Dan had a problem with the way that other choirs sang hymns. What exactly... maybe not necessarily a problem, but just maybe he thought they weren't doing it the best way.

Schmoke: Well, most churches, well, churches have the problem in that in many instances they do not have good musicians in the church. And they tended to drag, they take forever to sing a hymn. So he always felt that the hymn singing should be upbeat. It should be happy. And it should portray happiness rather than sound like a funeral dirge.

So his technique was to accelerate the pace of the hymn, and also the words. He emphasized that we should get the message of the hymn over to the congregation. And that was very important. Each hymn has a message, has a definite message. And if you don't get that message across, then you're not doing your job.

So his idea was to accelerate the time of the hymns, give them more life. And to hear that choir sing was just a joy in itself.

Q: Was the Great Hymns Choir, the techniques that was set in place by Uncle Dan, was it unique in the Baltimore music scene as far as other choirs?

Schmoke: Yes it was because you didn't find many choirs that specialized in singing hymns. Most choirs sang anthems or showtunes or something like that, but you didn't find many that specialized in singing hymns.

Q: How big was the Great Hymns Choir at its greatest point?

Schmoke: About fifty members.

Q: And you joined in 1956.

Schmoke: I joined in 1956. The choir itself was formed by Uncle Dan in 1954. October, 1954.

Q: Now how did the Great Hymns Choir fit into the Baltimore music scene? It's clear that it was very unique, and it was the only choir that specialized hymns, but was it very well known to the public?

Schmoke: Oh yes. Yes. It was known to churches because Uncle Dan was an outgoing person, and he made sure that ministers knew about this choir. He started off with Methodist Ministers, but he contacted any minister he thought he could get his choir to sing. And he made it known that this was the Great Hymns Choir, Baltimore's Great Hymns Choir. He was ready to sing anywhere.

We sang at large churches, at small churches, at medium size. He would take us anywhere that a church would allow us to come. We traveled all up and down the eastern seaboard from Richmond, well, as far south as Richmond, but as far north as Boston.

And one of our greatest programs was done at Boston University in front of a congregation of Methodist musicians.

Q: What year was that?

Schmoke: I don't remember exactly, but I think it was around 1960 or '62.

Q: So it was in front of Methodist ministers?

Schmoke: Musicians.

Q: Musicians. Musicians. I'm sorry

Schmoke: Yes.

Q: What was it called?

Schmoke: It was a just a conference of Methodist musicians.

Q: And how did that go? What was that like?

Schmoke: It was just a convocation of Methodist musicians all over the country. You know how we Americans love to have meetings. [Laughter] And no matter what the group is we have to have a meeting or a convention. This was a convention of Methodist musicians. It occurred at Boston University.

Q: Now did you sing at this convention?

Schmoke: Yeah, we sang. That was one of the spots that Uncle Dan had wrangled from the convention sponsors. He was not shy at all. He felt that his choir was the best in the United States, and he convinced people that his choir was worth listening to. So we sang at that convention, and the people were really thrilled with us.

Q: Okay, so in traveling with the Great Hymns choir you said you were everywhere between Richmond and Boston. Were there any extraordinary trips that stand out in your mind? And also what was that like traveling with all those people? How did you travel?

Schmoke: In most instances, we traveled by car in a motorcade. Now for the long trips, for Boston and to Richmond, we hired a bus, and we went on the bus. But most of our engagements were between Maryland, somewhere in Maryland, Virginia, Pennsylvania. So in that case, we would go by motorcade. We had several cars, mine being one of them. And we'd just load up people in the cars and take off.

Q: At one point your role in the Great Hymns Choir eventually changed from just being a member to something more. Why don't we talk about that.

Schmoke: Okay. After so many years, Uncle Dan was promoted to district superintendent, and his headquarters was to be on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. He went to Chestertown.

Q: District superintendent of the?

Schmoke: Of the Methodist, the Methodist Church. See he was part of the Methodist conference. He was made district superintendent on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. He had to move to Chestertown, and in so doing, it was very difficult for him to come to Baltimore to rehearse the choir.

While he was in Bishop Love's office, of course, he lived in the city, and he was able to rehearse the choir at any time. Well, our rehearsal was on Saturday night. No, no it was on Thursday night. He could not break away and come to a rehearsal while he was in Chestertown.

So at that time, in 1965, I took over rehearsing the choir. And eventually, I became the choir's director. I'm not really a musician, but I just, I really used the same techniques that Uncle Dan taught us. The same techniques so that you couldn't tell who was directing the choir, either myself or Uncle Dan, because we used the same kind of technique in presenting the hymns.

Q: Okay. Did you feel different, different at all as being, you know, running the choir as opposed to when you were just a member? Did people look at you differently?

Schmoke: No, not really because all of us, well, we knew each other, and all of us had a great love for the singing of the hymns and a great love for Uncle Dan really. So no, the attitude toward me did not change because we all knew each other. We were just having a good time singing. There was no problem created by my directing the hymns, the choir itself.

Q: So you started directing the choir, or took over for the rehearsing in 1965.

Schmoke: Yeah.

Q: And then you became formal director in?

Schmoke: Well, I don't say the formal director. I was the substitute director. [Laughter] I was, because we still considered Uncle Dan as the real director of the choir. And unfortunately, after his retirement, there was a problem of mental deterioration which you find in many brilliant people. He was a brilliant man.

And I more or less took over the directing of the choir then. We didn't realize what was happening until in 1975 we gave a program over at the Masonic Temple, and it was in tribute to Uncle Dan and his many years of directing the choir. And it was on that occasion that we realized that there was certainly mental deterioration there. Such that we couldn't allow him to continue directing. That's when I really, I really took over the choir.

Q: Back to the status of the Great Hymns Choir in Baltimore. I know that there it was unique in the Baltimore music scene.

Schmoke: Yes.

Q: In going on your trips, did you interact with other choirs from around the country? And if so, how did the Great Hymns Choir stand in relation to them in terms of how good the Great Hymns Choir was, and also in terms of, you know, its presentation, its technical side of singing?

Schmoke: Well, it was Uncle Dan's purpose was to teach congregations and choirs that hymn singing could, shouldn't be just an adjunct to the service. It should be a major part of a church service.

We were evangelists in a sense, in that we were trying to project the hymns as a major part of the service. And as we went around the country, we had a cadre of very fine singers. Now Uncle Dan made sure of that. He started this choir as a Methodist choir, because we used the Methodist hymnal. He would go around to various churches, and when he'd hear a good voice, he would encourage that person to join the choir. And that's how the choir was formed.

So that you had a choir loaded with very good singers. And they were not the run of the mill. The average church choir would not have many very good singers. So his idea was to project the hymns. As we went around, we were sort of evangelists telling people that hymn singing was a major portion of the service and should not be cast aside. Choir directors should concentrate on hymns as they do concentrate on anthems. So that was our purpose.

I think we got it across to choir members. We were invariably complimented after one of our concerts.

Q: After one or all?

Schmoke: After all of them.

Q: So it was pretty much well known that the Great Hymns Choir was about as good as you could get.

Schmoke: Oh yeah.

Q: In the city of Baltimore.

Schmoke: Oh yeah.

Q: Did any other choirs or any other singing groups fancy themselves as being your equal?

Schmoke: No. There was no real competition in that area. This was our specialty, and as far as we could see, nobody else tried to duplicate our efforts. Nobody else decided to specialize mainly in hymns. And, of course, our concerts consisted, well, we would sing an anthem or two, but mainly the concert was hymns right out of the Methodist Hymnal.

Q: So what ever became of the Great Hymns Choir?

Schmoke: Well, it retired. And I can't tell you the year that I stopped directing the choir, but it was becoming too much of a burden on me to keep the choir going.

Q: Did you have other responsibilities at the time?

Schmoke: Oh yes, including this credit union. I don't remember exactly when Reverend Ridout died, the choir sang for that funeral. But it became too burdensome for me so I told the choir at the end of the certain season, and I don't remember which season it was, that I would cease to direct the choir. And we couldn't seem to get anybody to take my place to direct the choir. So we just faded out of existence.

I still have a list of choir members which I write occasionally. And I encourage them to come to hear the Morehouse Glee Club in concert.

Q: So you still go to those? Do you sing?

Schmoke: I still sing in the church choir. Yeah. I didn't stop singing; I just stopped directing the choir. My greatest joy is singing in this church choir, the chancel choir of the Douglas Memorial Community Church, and which, incidentally, has a very fine musician directing it: Mr. James Spencer Hammond.

Q: So the Great Hymns Choir was effectively, I guess you could say disbanded.

Schmoke: Yes.

Q: Do you think that you've left a strong legacy as being not only a member, but as one of the leaders of the Great Hymns Choir?

Schmoke: Yes. Well, I like to think so. Incidentally, we had a terrific director in, and accompanist in Audrey McCallum. And every now and then she encourages me to get the choir back together again.

We have had one reunion since then, since the choir dissolved, and we just had a good time. Cause we came down here, we had a good time just singing hymns. It's really great.

Q: Do you ever see, do you think there could be a possibility that the Great Hymns Choir could be sort of revitalized?

Schmoke: Oh yes. I think so. Some of the older members still sing because I still sing all the. And, yeah, it could be revitalized. Preferably with a bona fide musician. I never pretended that I was a musician.

I'm a music lover, and I took the techniques that Dan had taught us, and used that with the choir, but I admittedly am not the musician that needs to direct a choir like that. Spencer Hammond could do a better job of that.

But if there were younger people who were interested, and I think that there are. I think that you could effectively. You'd have to go searching for them. Who would make the commitment to come to a rehearsal. Even though you're just singing hymns, you have to rehearse. You have to rehearse. If you can get a group of young people who are committed to that kind of thing, the choir could be re-formed. Yes, I think so. It would be a good thing.

Here at this church occasionally we have a hymn sing. Spencer is always trying to project the newer hymns. The hymns didn't stop being written when Isaac Watts died. He was just one of the, well, Uncle Dan always called him the greatest hymn writer along with Charles Wesley.

But Spencer tries to project the newer hymns. And we still have hymns being written. So it would be great if such a choir could be re-formed, but I'm not the one to do it.

Q: Well, just as a side question. What are some of hymns that the Great Hymns Choir was known for singing that stand out in your mind that would really, that really displayed the technical skill and the uniqueness that the Great Hymns Choir had instilled in it by Uncle Dan?

Schmoke: Well, one of our favorites was *God Moves in a Mysterious Way His Wonders to Perform*. That's a Charles Wesley hymn. Uncle Dan, we would phrase the hymns so that each phrase of the hymn got the message to the audience. That was one of his very good ones, *God Moves in a Mysterious Way His Wonders to Perform*. Another one that he used to demonstrate that a choir could use a hymn and make it into an anthem was *I'll Praise My Maker While I've Breath*, and that was a John Wesley hymn. And he was one that he recited just before he died, *I'll praise my Maker While I've Breath, and when my voice is lost in death, praise shall employ my nobler power. My days of praise will ne'er be passed while life and thoughts of being last or immortality endures*.

Those are two of the fine hymns that we would project to the audience. And I can name a lot of the hymns that audiences, choirs don't, that churches don't ordinarily sing. Well, and some of the hymns that they do sing, but drag so badly. And Uncle Dan would pick them up.

Let's see if I can think of another one. I need a book.

Q: Okay, well, this is the last question.

Schmoke: Okay.

Q: What would you want, or what do you want the Great Hymns Choir in 2002 to be remembered for? What it did and what it stood for?

Schmoke: To project the importance of the hymns in the service. That was really our purpose. To project the importance of hymn singing, congregational singing and choir singing of the hymns. That they not be dragged and dragged out and made into funeral dirges, but that they were happy, they should project happiness to the audience. And an audience, a congregation should look forward to singing hymns rather than thinking of hymns as a, as just a sideline of the church service.



That hymns are as important as preaching, because they project a message to the congregation. And if we did anything, if the congregations that we sang before remember anything about us, that would be the thing that I would hope that they would remember. That hymn singing can be beautiful, and that it is important in a church service.

Q: Okay. Well, Mr. Schmoke, thank you very much for your time. It was very educational and very interesting. Okay.

Schmoke: Okay.

END OF SESSION