

Family's support helps Baylor protect Black Gospel music

December 7, 2021

WACO—A professor's search-and-rescue mission to prevent the loss of musical history and a family's desire to honor the wishes of their late husband and father combined not only to preserve a distinctly African American art form, but also give it the academic attention it previously lacked.

Baylor University recently dedicated the [Black Gospel Archive and Listening Center](#) at Moody Memorial Library. It serves as the permanent home for the Black Gospel Music Restoration Project's collection of recordings from that genre's Golden Age, 1945 to 1975. The physical collection includes more than 10,000 vinyl LPs, along with a vast holding of digitized material representing about 1,900 artists.



Robert Darden, professor of journalism at Baylor University, is founder of Baylor's Black Gospel Music Restoration Project. (Photo/Baylor Marketing and Communications)

“We’re told it is the largest Black Gospel music collection accessible to the public,” said Bob Darden, the Baylor journalism professor and former Gospel Music editor for *Billboard Magazine* whose vision birthed the [Black Gospel Music Restoration Project](#).

In 2009, the Prichard Family Foundation established the Lev H. Prichard III Traditional Black Music Restoration Endowed Fund. Earlier this year, Ella Prichard and the family foundation gave \$1.5 million to establish the Lev H. Prichard III Chair in the Study of Black Worship. The endowed faculty position will further the work and research of the restoration project, as well as advance scholarship in Black worship and preaching.

“Outside of the [restoration project’s] original donor, Charles Royce, it’s pretty clear that the Prichards are the primary angels for this project,” Darden said. “But it’s not just the money, as significant as that has been and as generous as the Prichard family has been. It’s Ella’s support as a former university regent and influencer, helping an old journalism professor learn how to work with administration and lobby for the project. She is our greatest advocate.”

Chain of events leads to restoration project

In February 2005, Darden wrote an op-ed article in the *New York Times* describing the influence of Black Gospel music on many musical genres. He explained unless the original recordings and memorabilia from the Golden Age of that genre were preserved, vitally important history would disappear.

“It would be more than a cultural disaster to forever lose this music,” he wrote. “It would be a sin.”

That article sparked a \$350,000 gift by Royce, a Connecticut businessman with no previous connections to Baylor. Ella Prichard, in turn, read an article about Royce's donation and the fledgling Black Gospel Music Restoration Project, which she pointed out to her husband Lev, founder of the Prichard Oil Company and Apco Minerals.

"Lev was the music lover in the family," she recalled.

In particular, he enjoyed Black music in all its forms. Growing up in Oklahoma, his family employed a Black woman as a live-in cook and frequent babysitter for their son.

"If they went to the movies together, he sat in the Black balcony with her. If his parents were away for a weekend, he went to church with her," Ella said. "It may not have been altogether unique, but it certainly was not typical for a white child in Oklahoma to be reared with one foot in Black life."

As he grew older, Lev's appreciation for Black culture led to his passion for traditional Black music—jazz, blues and gospel.

Honor Lev Prichard's memory

So, when the Prichards' high-school-age grandson planned a campus visit to Baylor University, Lev—in spite of failing health—insisted on accompanying him, on the condition he could visit with Darden and learn more about the Black Gospel Music Restoration Project.

"An entourage from the development office trailed down to the studio [in the Ray I. Riley Digitization Center] with him. Lev sat down in the studio. The door was closed, and for the next 45 minutes he listened to music while the development officers cooled their heels in the hallway," Darden recalled. "When he emerged, he said something to the effect, 'I want to

help make sure this happens.’”

Prichard gave an initial donation to the project. After his death in April 2009, his family and its foundation decided to honor his memory by establishing the endowed fund to benefit the restoration project.

Donating to the project was an easy decision, but attaching Lev Prichard’s name to it required some serious family discussion and deep thought, Ella recalled.

“Lev couldn’t stand recognition for giving. It made him so uncomfortable,” she said.

However, after his death, many beneficiaries of his anonymous gifts spoke about how his generosity made so many good things possible.

“As the things he had quietly done came to light, we had to get used to that,” she said.

She and Darden both praised Pattie Orr, dean of Baylor University Libraries when the Black Gospel Restoration Project launched, for her vision and support. Likewise, they expressed appreciation to her successor, John Wilson, and to Jeffry Archer, the current dean who committed resources to the Black Gospel Archive and Listening Center.

“At a university, different disciplines tend to operate in silos. Libraries are the only institution on campus everybody trusts, because they exist to serve everyone. When it comes to academic turf wars, libraries are Switzerland. They don’t have an agenda,” Darden said.

‘Opened doors to the Black

community'



Ella Prichard and the Prichard Family Foundation established an endowed fund to help support the Black Gospel Music Restoration Project at Baylor University and gave \$1.5 million to the university to establish an endowed chair in the study of Black worship. (File Photo / Ken Camp)

Ella Prichard—a longtime advocate for social justice who wrote editorials in the *Baylor Lariat* when she was a student calling for the integration of Baylor University—sees the Black Gospel Music Restoration Project and the endowed chair in the study of Black worship as significant for the university.

“I’ve always wanted Baylor to be a school for all Baptists. This has opened doors to the Black community in ways nothing else has,” she said, noting Black churches and worship are “a major part of the story of Black culture.”

Prichard—a longtime member of First Baptist Church in Corpus Christi and

now a member of Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas—commended Baylor for naming its [Commission on Historic Campus Representations](#). She particularly applauded Baylor President Linda Livingstone and her administration for taking steps to implement the commission’s recommendations to address the university’s historic links to slaveholding and racial injustice.

“Baylor has done a phenomenal job addressing its own history of racism,” she said.

The endowed chair in the study of Black worship and the programs the chair oversees will provide scholars opportunities to explore the contributions of the Black church within an interdisciplinary context.

‘A perfect fit for Baylor’

Unlike most art forms, Black sacred music does not have a prominent professional journal where peer-reviewed papers can be published or platforms where scholars can conduct seminars, Prichard noted.

“It’s been neglected by the academy,” she said. “It’s a perfect fit for Baylor.”

In 2015, the Black Gospel Restoration Project became part of the permanent Musical Crossroads exhibition at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of African American History and Culture.

Both the physical collection and digital archives continue to expand exponentially, and Archer already has pledged Baylor University Libraries will devote additional space to it as needed.

The Prichard family has celebrated the way the project has grown from an effort at preserving vinyl recordings to a multidisciplinary research initiative.

“The vision just keeps widening,” Ella Prichard said. “My life has been enormously enriched by the experience. It took so many people for it to get to this point, and every link in the chain of events was important.

“Bob and Mary Darden are convinced it was providential. I guess I’m not quite as Calvinistic as that. But there’s no question the right people entered the project at the right time each step of the way. It had to have God’s hand on it.”