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DOCUMENTARY FILM

# Hallelujah!

*A Legendary Gospel Documentary is Born Again*

September 5, 2019 · Michael Giltz

It's a miracle! In the last six months the Lord has graced us with not one but two amazing films about gospel music, both of them mentioned with reverence but virtually unseen for decades.

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**SAY AMEN, SOMEBODY** (5/5 stars)

**Directed by:** George T. Nierenberg

**Starring:** Willie Mae Ford Smith, Thomas A. Dorsey, Sallie Martin, DeLois Barrett Campbell, the O'Neal Twins

**Running time:** 100 min

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First came the Aretha Franklin concert film *Amazing Grace*. Director Sydney Pollack filmed it in 1972...and it

promptly disappeared down a rabbit hole of technical and legal difficulties. As the music Franklin recorded became the best-selling gospel album of all time, the legend of this long-lost film grew and grew. Surely no movie could match the hype. But it did. Finally released in April, *Amazing Grace* immediately made a name for itself as one of the great concert films of all time.

And if that didn't save the soul of some cynical film critics, here comes the 1982 documentary *Say Amen, Somebody*. Roger Ebert and Gene Siskel raved about it on their TV show. Numerous outlets (including *Rolling Stone* and *People*) named it one of the best films of the year. Theatrically, it grossed a very impressive \$1.1 million in North America (a LOT of money for a documentary film in those days). Then it disappeared.

## It Is Risen

I've been waiting to see it ever since. Siskel & Ebert sparked my interest and when the movie came nowhere near South Florida during its theatrical run, I did the next best thing. I bought the soundtrack. Listening to that in 1983, Aretha Franklin's *Amazing Grace* in 1984, and then the cast album for *The Gospel At Colonus* in 1985 explains why my music collection includes the Swan Silvertones and Marion Williams (and of course Mahalia Jackson) alongside pop and jazz and country and so on. The soundtrack to *Say Amen, Somebody* was my gateway drug, but it was only a contact high. I wanted to see the movie.

Now, finally, some 36 years later, it's here. Lovingly restored by Milestone Film & Video alongside partners like the Smithsonian and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences, it undoubtedly looks and sounds better than ever.

It goes without saying the performances are glorious, whether delivered around a kitchen table, at a nursing home, in a two-bit storefront church, or at a national convention for choirs and choruses. But for a film often described as joyous and uplifting, *Say Amen, Somebody* achieves greatness by quietly and effectively telling a much more complex story.

Its focus is on a celebration of the career of Willie Mae Ford Smith but encompasses several generations of singers, from Smith and Thomas A. Dorsey to the O'Neal Twins and the Barrett Sisters down to newcomers like Zella Jackson Price. Almost invisibly, director George Nierenberg shows the battle of wills between Smith and Dorsey's right-hand organizer Sallie Martin, the intense pressure women faced even in the 1980s for daring to preach in such male-dominated faiths, and the sad state of affairs for gospel music in the early 1980s.

Smith taught generations of singers (including Mahalia Jackson), wrote songs, and truly innovated as an arranger, but this film just takes her importance as a given. We see Smith spreading the gospel in nursing homes. She listens with dismay as her grandson diminishes her life's work by saying he doesn't really think it's proper for women to preach. Then she counsels Zella Jackson Price on how very hard it is to make it as a singer when people resent your success and your need to tour, and insist the only place a woman should be is at home raising children.

## The Magical Mr. Dorsey



*The father of Gospel music, Thomas A. Dorsey, in Say Amen, Somebody, the 1982 classic Gospel documentary directed by George Nierenberg.*

Smith was a compelling life-force of a woman even in her late 70s when this film was shot. But it still took an iron will not to turn the movie over to Thomas A. Dorsey, as signal a figure in gospel music as there will ever be. He's cantankerous, pointed, funny, sharp, and inspiring to everyone around him even though he must struggle just to reach the altar. But the man can't stop creating music and pushing those around him to do the same. When Nierenberg films him walking into a backyard, Dorsey even seems to be conducting the birds on how they sing.

Smith gets a special evening devoted to her career, an evening filled with stirring performances, and the movie expands again and again. We see an annual convention for choirs and choruses, where no one is even sure if Dorsey will be well enough to attend (Try and stop him; he lived another decade, dying in 1993, one year before Smith herself). But what I noted was how...small the convention seemed to be. It looked like the final days of a dying world, with Smith and Sallie Martin bickering over who started what back in the 1920s.

## A Road Of Sacrifice



Watching younger acts like the O'Neal Twins meet with record station DJs in tiny out-of-the way locations, you realize how far away from the mainstream gospel music was in the early 1980s. Indeed, Smith's own recorded output is paltry and doesn't do justice to the importance of her style on so many others. In the decades ahead, superstars like Oleta Adams and multi-act events would fill Madison Square Garden while TV would broadcast the Gospel Music Association's Dove Awards. But back in 1982, you might easily have feared pop and R&B would completely engulf gospel music.

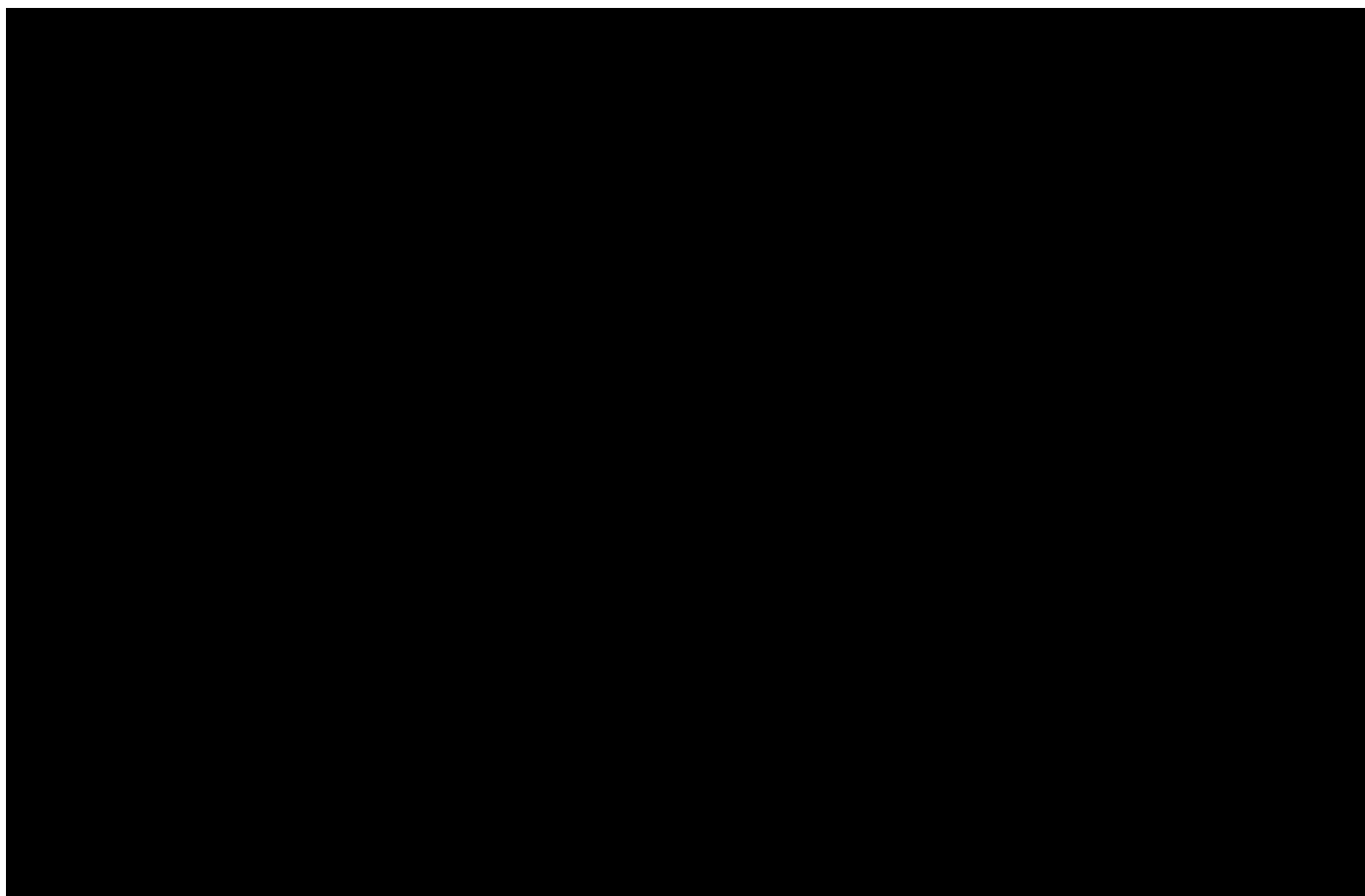
But then someone sings. Suddenly, DeLois Barrett's struggle to fulfill her dream and tour in Europe when her husband wants her to stay home and be a draw for his struggling new church doesn't matter. The untold story of Smith's sister—who clearly had personal struggles that go unmentioned in the film and has spent her life in the shadow of that formidable talent—fades away. We forget Dorsey's infirmities and suspend the tug of war between fame and faith.

Willie Mae Ford Smith sits beamingly in the front pews while the Barrett Sisters tear it up on "He Has Brought Us." The two flanking sisters carry on for a line and suddenly DeLois bursts in with a triumphant high note and the members of the choir seated behind them leap up in joy.

At another point in the film, Zella Jackson Price sings a ringing, rapturous "I'm His Child," and you remember why Roger Ebert called this film glorious. Surely the future of gospel is safe in her hands? (Three years later she would give a triumphant concert at Carnegie Hall and you can see her sing in HBO's *Angels In America*.)

And if you think Willie Mae Ford Smith is going to spend the entire concert celebrating her career without taking the stage herself, you don't know much about performers.

Ken Burns would need sixteen hours to scratch the surface of the complex and riveting history of gospel music. But in 100 minutes of *Say Amen Somebody*, director Nierenberg gives a sense of the music's history, the major figures, the flaws (like the sexism of the churches) and sees a resurgence up ahead. Aided immeasurably by two great cinematographers (stalwart documentary presence Don Lenzer and Oscar nominee Edward Lachman of *Far From Heaven*), this is indeed a document and a testament in every sense of the word. Amen to that.



Tags: [Amazing Grace](#), [Aretha Franklin](#), [Say Amen Somebody](#), [Willie Mae Ford Smith](#)

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## Michael Giltz

Michael Giltz is a freelance writer based in New York City covering all areas of entertainment, politics, sports and more. He has written extensively for the *New York Post*, *New York Daily News*, *New York Magazine*, *The Advocate*, *Out*, *Huffington Post*, *Premiere Magazine*,

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