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Preface to *Singing in a Strange Land*

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Preface to *Singing in a Strange Land*

Abstract

Salvatore delves into the life of the one of the most influential clergyman in twentieth-century African-American religious life, from his 1915 origins as a poor Mississippi farmboy to his early years as a preacher in Tennessee to his 1950s rise to acclaim in Detroit. Along the way, Franklin's charismatic preaching style revolutionized the sermon yet he was no saint away from the pulpit. His encouragement to proclaim both faith and dignity in the black community helped bolster the civil rights movement.

Keywords

C. L. Franklin, African-American history, gospel music, religion, civil rights

Disciplines

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Comments

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PREFACE

Born in rural Mississippi early in the twentieth century, a black child who grew up in a land dominated by white men and the white cotton they grew, Clarence LaVaughn Franklin became in time one of black America's most renowned preachers. He never completed grade school, but his intense desire to transcend the limitations Mississippi would impose propelled him. His sermons, compelling original presentations within a deeply familiar preaching tradition, offered new ways of considering the interplay of religious belief, racial identity, and social activism in daily life. His own transitions— from Mississippi to Detroit, from a narrowed understanding to a more complex expression of faith's meanings— served as a model for untold thousands of other black rural southerners as they migrated into the urban industrial world. His musical tastes ranged from the sacred to the secular, reflecting his belief that all forms of music were God's creations. Three of his daughters, all raised in the church, shared this talent and sensibility; one of them, his extraordinarily gifted daughter Aretha, would, in time, transform American music. That, too, he considered fully compatible with his ministry.

There has never been a full study of this remarkable man. This is unfortunate, for to explore Franklin's life is also to examine some of the most important changes in twentieth-century America. The journey that began for Franklin in the Mississippi Delta before World War I was not, in its broad outlines, unique to him. Rather, his effort to project a public voice was part of a multigenerational struggle by African Americans to reinterpret the meaning of American democracy. In that process, a civil rights movement gathered power, patterns of work and community forcefully altered, and an African American musical tradition reconfigured the notes most Americans listened to.

Clarence LaVaughn Franklin was deeply involved in these developments. His sermons, seventy-five of which were recorded live and sold nationally, provided pointed social and political analyses that consciously urged others to discover their voices and to engage the world about them. His Detroit home, moreover, was a crossroads for post-World War II black musical culture. The great jazz and blues artists, gospel singers, rhythm and blues performers, and the enormously talented Detroit youngsters who would so influence popular music mingled at the gatherings he hosted. All of this constituted Franklin's world.

C. L. Franklin was a complicated man, one who knew sin and salvation, one who possessed remarkable strength and painful weakness. A man of the cotton fields and the inner cities, his rise was the crest of a powerful social movement with origins not in the ocean's swell but in the rich loam of the Mississippi Delta. To know him is to understand more fully the complex experiences central to modern American life. And to know that, of course, is to understand more fully ourselves.