Lifelong Memphian Michael Otis Dodson is the business manager for the Angelic Voices of Faith community choir and the director of fine arts in worship at Christ Missionary Baptist Church. Well connected in the gospel music scene, I interviewed Dodson about the crossover between secular and religious music, the business aspects of gospel music and the history of contemporary gospel groups in Memphis. The interview took place in a quaint, multi-purpose room at the church.

00:30 MD says that he was born in 1965 in Memphis, Tenn. His father was a retired mechanic and his mother was an administrative assistant. He was the youngest of four kids, all boys.

01:16 MD says he came from a musical family. His father played saxophone and trumpet, one brother played the drums, another brother played guitar and another brother is Larry Dodson, lead singer for “the legendary Bar-Kays.” MD is 11 years younger than the third born. The older brothers sometimes played sets together growing up, but the age gap kept MD from participating. MD says that growing up he took piano lessons, classes on music theory and learned to read music.

02:20 MD says that his family played all types of music growing up. His father was a fan of big band music. His mother was an R&B fan. Blues and gospel were staples in the household as well. His father would hum jazz tunes around the house and he describes his mother as a “socialite.”

03:28 MD says he grew up going to church and his grandmothers were very “spiritual women.” The first church he attended as a child was Oak Grove Baptist Church, later, the family joined Riverside Baptist Church. He says,

“Let me tell you what’s strange, I didn’t like going to church as a little boy. I really didn’t because I really was afraid of the Holy Ghost because it would make them kind of jump around and it would kind of frighten me, but the one thing that I really admired about church was the choir. So it wasn’t until that my mother told me that you can’t join the church until you become baptized. I struggled with getting baptized. I would actually say that I got baptized so that I could join the choir. But even after I got baptized it took me a minute to get to the church choir,
but I always sang in the school choir. But yes, eventually I made it to the church choir. Probably around 13 or 14 I made it to the church choir.”

05:17 MD remembers the church choir singing “Let Him in Today” by Rev. James Cleveland and other Cleveland songs and songs by Walter Hawkins and the Hawkins Family. He said he has always been “a fond lover of gospel music.” As a child, he went to sleep with the radio playing and woke up to the morning show by Joan Golden on WLOK AM gospel radio station in Memphis. He remembers donning a choir robe and white gloves and directing his imaginary choir as a little boy.

07:18 MD explains the white glove tradition in the Baptist church. “Back in the day, ushers normally wore black suits, ladies had the white dresses with the little white caps on and the men wore the white gloves and the ladies wore the white gloves as well for the communion Sundays and special events. So, I just took that as something that I wanted to have on my hands as well.”

09:33 MD says he was the director of his middle and high schools gospel choirs. He said the trade of choir directing is a gift from God. Music must be understood intellectually, but choir directing must be felt emotionally. There are some workshops around the country that discuss “techniques,” but he is not aware of any formal schools for choir directors.

12:00 MD says that a choir director must know every part and voice line for each choral song. He or she must have a sharp ear to hear when something is out of tune or not blending. And he or she must have a commanding presence. “You have to be very commanding, very strong and very smart,” he says.

13:42 MD says he shifted from music as a passion to music as a fulltime career in 2000 when his mother died.

“I worked at AutoZone corporate office for 10 years in the IT division. I was a level 2 technical analysis and trying to juggle a career out here with a recording choir. I was a recording artist as well which required a lot of travel. And anyone in the IT fields knows that at any given time there could be some type of problem so I was on-call a lot. Then I would have to be at this engagement. Or I would need to be out of town so I would have to work my shift and catch a flight and go. When my mother passed, she passed of ovarian cancer, and before she died she was in hospice for, um, two months. And we sat there and we talked and I admired her for the fact that she never let grass grow under her feet.

“She always did everything that she wanted to do. And it dawned on me that if I’m going to do what I want to do then I don’t have time to waste doing something that I really don’t want to do. So I took a leap of faith and a faith move and after she passed away I decided that I wasn’t going back to work. That I was going to work for my group. And I officially took off and became booking manager and kept them out on the road as much as I could. And did recordings, I was executive producer of our last project. So in 2000 was when I made my mind
up that I was going to be poor [hardy laugh] and struggling [more laughter]. Yeah, that’s what happened.”

15:35 MD says he has been a member of Billy Rivers and the Angelic Voices of Faith since 1983. He joined the group a couple of days after his high school graduation. Today, he is the business manager for the group.

16:05 MD credits Gwendolyn Turner with founding the group originally as the gospel choir at Southside High School in 1977. He says Turner was the first person to start a gospel choir in the Memphis City School system. In 1979, Turner and many of her fellow choir members graduated and entered the University of Arkansas in Pine Bluff. They later changed the name of the choir from the Southside Alumni Gospel Choir to the Angelic Voices of Faith and Billy Rivers connected with the group a few years later. When the group grew in the 1980s, Rivers directed Melrose High School gospel choir, Turner directed Southside gospel choir and MD directed Whitehaven High School gospel choir. “We all formed this wonderful friendship over 27, 28 years.” Today, they are all in the mid to late 40s.

19:10 MD says the choir has been recording music since 1995 and has six albums. It has been signed to three record labels—CGI, High Stacks Records and Testimony Records. They are currently independent. Their first project, *A Gift to You*, was a Stella Awards nominated album, followed by *Got to Lift Him, Gifted View, Getting Ready, The Best is Coming* and *Magnify Him*, which is a collaboration with Keith Pringle.

20:45 MD describes what it was like to be nominated for a Stella Award and talks about the celebrities that he saw during the awards show. The choir’s biggest hits to date are “Blessed Jesus,” “Get in Touch with Heaven,” “He Knows” and “Never Leave You.”

23:00 MD talks about the choir’s unfortunate luck with record companies that motivated them to be independent. He said balancing the ministry aspect with the business aspect is hard and you have to “stay prayed up.” He said that he encounters a lot of different personalities in the business of gospel music and some gospel promoters and enthusiasts have attitudes that are not Christ-like.

25:48 MD talks about the choir’s distribution deal with Select-O Hits. The CDs are sold in record stores, through consignment deals in Christian bookstores, through independent agents and by the choir at concerts. The choir does about three shows a month. JD says that’s 36 shows a year. They also work with a prison ministry and a drug and alcohol rehabilitation group and host fellowship for the local gospel music community.

29:15 MD says the choir also holds benefits concerts for groups like Hope House, a home for mothers and children affected HIV and AIDS.

30:00 The choir tours throughout the Southeast, frequently in Texas. [JD clears his voice for the third time in the background.] Todd Top Talent is an agent that they use in Texas that often books shows.
MD says that there are 45 members in choir and a five-piece a band. Choir membership is by audition only and then hopefuls are interviewed. The committee prays before making the final selection. Choir members pay “seed offerings” (dues) of $20 a month, but out of town travel is all expenses paid. Travel expenses are covered by the honorariums provided by the host church or organization. They did a 10-city tour in Italy in 2001. “Amen” and “Oh Happy Day,” were two of the most requested songs during the choir’s Italian tour.

CS asks what was the reception of the Italian audience. MD replies,

“I can remember we were in Naples, and they put us in this room and when we went to do our sound check there was really no one there but a few people—just a few. And when were done with the sound check, they moved us to this room. And when it was time to go perform we couldn’t believe the masses of people that had come. So much so that we had to hold each other’s hands to get through the crowd, to get to the stage. And even though they didn’t speak the language, everyone didn’t, they really understood the message. I mean you would see tears. You would see all types of emotions. And when it was over, they would always come and just share how they were touched; how they were blessed in the best way that they could.”

MD tells how his brother’s group, the Bar-Kays, also receives warm receptions overseas especially in Japan and Africa. Billy Rivers and the Angelic Voices of Faith choir often collaborates with the Bar-Kays including a recently held benefit concert for the victims that survived the Haitian earthquake on January 12, 2010. The choir has song backup for Rev. Al Green and the choir is featured on the soundtrack of The Greater Debaters.

MD describes the gospel music scene in Memphis as “awesome.” He said many of the blues and R&B artists from Memphis were rooted in gospel music and that gospel music is inescapable in Memphis and the South. He said local break out talent includes producer Marques Walker and Kevin Davidson who owns his own record label. “Everywhere you go, on every corner there’s a talented gospel music artist in this city. You can’t escape them.”

MD says other Memphis-based community choirs include Kevin Davidson and the Voices, Darrell Pettis and the Strength in Praise, Vincent Tharpe and Kenosis, and Andrew Knox and New Change. He continues,

“The list goes on and on. There are quite a few. Herman Dickey, who I call the gospel historian, had a little database of gospel community choirs and I think he had up to about 50-something. So even if I can’t name their names they are out here be it group or choir. There are a lot of new up and coming artists.”

MD talks about his relationship with the late O’landa Draper who started O’landa Draper’s Associates. He says,

“O’landa was the main man here for gospel music. He brought gospel music—the eye of gospel music, the artists and the industry— back to Memphis. He was a
talented individual. He was an awesome individual. He was an awesome songwriter and God knows he was one of the best directors, if not the best director, that I’ve ever seen in my life. And we were very good friends.”

46:00 CS asks MD to clarify when and how Draper brought gospel music back to Memphis.

“It was late ’80s, early ’90s I would say. He said he had a vision to start this choir. He knew what they were going to be about. He knew they were going to do. And, when he did it, he went full steam ahead. And there was a lot of—I would say this—the attitude of the people outside of Memphis in terms of the heavyweights in gospel music always thought that there was division in Memphis gospel music. That we could never unify. Of course, the killing of Dr. Martin Luther King and a lot of other types of things that had certain stigmas on the city. People already had idea or a thought or an opinion about Memphis. And then, I don’t know what went down back in the day that we got the reputation that we could not unify. He broke all of that down.

“They saw this young man here. He started a conference. He brought in a lot of major gospel artists. He would make sure that when we had concerts that he brought in people that we never had a chance to see, but we always heard on the radio, so that began to bring everybody back. Then they begin to see how the city supported O’landa and that there was plenty unity here in terms of the gospel music, I would say. And that it was a myth or that whatever it was, it was over. [laughs softly]”

48:38 CS asks MD about his work outside the choir. MD says that for the last three years he has served as the director of Worship in Arts for Christ Missionary Baptist Church under the leadership of Rev. Dr. Gina M. Stewart. He also briefly talks about the liturgical dance (praise dance) ministry that he oversees at the church. He calls liturgical dance “the new genre of gospel of choirs” and describes it as praise through the art of dance. From week to week, the choir and the liturgical dance team coordinate their performances.

50:40 MD states that the choir is the second most important component of worship service behind the preacher.

51:50 CS ask JD if he has any questions for MD before the interview concludes. JD asks MD to elaborate on the Angelic Voices of Faith’s prison ministry. MD explains that the Shelby County Correctional Center hosts worship service for the prisoners every Sunday afternoon and his choir regularly sings at these services. He said that the music and message is well received and that the prisons have their own “talented” gospel choirs and musicians as well.

53:30 MD says that outreach performances have the greatest impact. “When you can make an impact and a difference in someone’s life, that’s the best and most fulfilling part of what we do, seriously.”
54:30 JD asks MD how the declining ties between artists and record companies affects gospel groups. MD credits the rap industry with paving the road for independent artists. The greater accessibility of technology also now means more artists have the ability to record themselves. Additionally, the Internet also allows artists to promote themselves and get their products into the hands of fans without a middleman. Record companies, says MD, are still critical for new artist, but established artists can continue their success independently.

58:00 CS asks MD if there is anything he wants to add that we did not cover in the interview. He says,

“The reason why we do what we do has never been for fame or fortune. Otherwise I would be loaded. But it’s been for the advancement of God’s kingdom and just to be able to serve people and others. And what we do brings smiles on faces and when people come and say, “You know, I could hardly watch them for watching you.” and all that kind of stuff, that does my heart good. Because I know that someone was inspired and touched and we reached somebody. To even just change someone’s mind. I know a little girl that was about to kill herself and we had the opportunity to just really minister to the young lady, the young girl because she felt that she was overweight and wasn’t pretty. And just being able to see her come up after the concert say, you know, she changed her mind. She had a different outlook on some things.

“There are different people within our ministry that have gifts of reaching young people. Our young people need help. They really do. They need guidance. There’s a line in one of Tyler Perry’s movies that Lou Gossett makes the statement, he says he worries for the young people of today because they are looking for love but have never been shown what love looks like or what it feels like so they don’t know what to look for. So it’s imperative that we let them know about God’s love. And that’s the true meaning of love and that’s what we do because we love God and God loves us.”

01:00:15 Interview concludes.