I have known Michael Dodson for a few years, but I had never sat down to talk to him one on one until the oral history interview on May 18, 2010. Dodson joined my church, Christ Missionary Baptist, as the minister of music some time ago and later became the director of fine arts in worship. The former director, Lester Snell, won an Oscar award in 1972 for his work on the theme song to Shaft. I knew that Snell’s successor must have come from a strong musical pedigree. I also knew that Dodson was well respected in the gospel music world because renowned gospel recording artist occasionally attend our Sunday worship service unannounced to visit Dodson while they are in town. These are two of the many reasons that I selected Dodson for the oral history project and he was an excellence selection because he has a wealth of knowledge about the gospel music scene locally and nationally.

My interview with Dodson was originally scheduled for 3 p.m., but earlier in the day he pushed the time back an hour in order to finish up some promotional work for an upcoming choir workshop and concert at the church by gospel great Kurt Carr. When Dodson arrived in the church fellowship hall just after 4 p.m. he had a hurried disposition as if he had been in motion all day. I asked him if he needed a moment to catch his breath and he said no and immediately sat down at the table where our equipment was set up for the interview. He was friendly and cheerful, but anxious and I tried to slow down the pace by speaking in a relaxed, gentle tone. Dodson, who emphasized his attention to detail during the interview, wore two-toned brown loafers made of suede and leather, light colored blue jeans and a close fitting long sleeves sky blue t-shirt that was tucked into his pants. His skin was pecan shell brown and tapered sideburns framed his neat, shoulder-length dreadlocks.

In addition to me, Dodson and recordist Jonathan Dial, church worker Tavarious Davis was also present in the large fellowship hall. Davis was a heavily recruited wide receiver who played football for the University of Memphis Tigers at the beginning of the decade. But on that day the former football star was setting up the fellowship hall for Bible Study. Because of the commotion in the background, Davis moved me, Dodson and Dial to a small, quieter room in another part of the building. This change of venue was important for two reasons. Firstly, it was a more intimate setting to hold an interview. Secondly, the relocation gave Dodson a chance to pause and relax. By the time our equipment was in place again, Dodson was reclined in a chair and at ease.

I started out the interview with background questions about his childhood and asked if there were other musical people in his family. His response gave me my first surprise of the session. As it
turns out, Michael Dodson is the younger brother of Larry Dodson, the lead singer of the Bar-Kays. The Bar-Kays recorded legendary hits in the ‘60s and 70s like “Too Hot to Stop” and “Soul Finger.” This connection is just one of the many ways in which the secular music scene and the sacred music scene intersect in Memphis. The interview with Thomas Crivens, Jr., which is also part of the American Music Archives, also notes this intersection.

Another theme that manifested during the interview was the long lasting effects of Dr. Martin Luther King’s assassination in Memphis. In my thesis entitled “Post Mortem: Tracing Black Life in Memphis after the Deaths of Handy, King and Elvis,” I discuss how the psychological trauma of the assassination devastated the political and economic core of the black community in Memphis. Without prompting, Dodson noted this same trend in the black music scene in Memphis. After King’s death, said Dodson, the Memphis gospel music scene earned a reputation for being fragmented and divisive. Although Dodson, who was a toddler in 1968, does not know if this reputation was warranted or ill conceived, it was a lived reality that tarnished the local gospel music scene and made national artist less open to collaborating with Memphis musicians. Less than 10 years after King’s murder, both Stax Records and Beale Street were boarded up. These events combined with Dodson’s sentiments illustrate an important point. The assassination of King in Memphis in 1968 was followed by a rapid decline of black agency in Memphis politically, economically and, as Dodson confirms, artistically.

Dodson credits O’Landa Draper with reviving the Memphis gospel music scene in the nineties. Draper started the O’Landa Draper’s Associates community choir and served as an ambassador for the city’s gospel music scene, said Dodson. His tours and his concerts featured the prominent recording artists of the day. These partnerships reintroduced the gospel music industry to the area’s rich music scene, said Dodson. Draper’s sudden death in 1998 was a national news story. Memphis has a strong tradition of community choirs like the Associates including the choir that Dodson serves as business manager for—Billy Rivers and the Angelic Voices of Faith. The choir performs no fewer than 36 songs shows a year, said Dodson. (After the interview, Dodson mentioned that Christ Missionary Baptist pastor Dr. Gina Stewart formerly served as narrator for the choir.) Although the choir’s travels are heavily concentrated in the South, they have performed internationally. Perhaps one of the most engaging moments of the interview came when Dodson talked about the enthusiastic reception that his group received during a show in Italy. Here again, arose another boarder theme because Memphis soul musicians often speak of the popularity of their music in Italy. There seems to be some unexplored Memphis-Italy connection that could be mined for further scholarship.

The interview, which lasted just over an hour, covered a host of topics. The only minor interruptions were the occasional vibration of Dodson’s phone when calls came in. He wore the phone in a case on his hip and quickly silenced each new call without opening the case or looking away from the interviewer. As evident by the steady buzzing of the phone, Dodson is a man in demand. After the interview ended, I assured him that since I am a member of the church that Dial and I could see ourselves out and he graciously accepted that offer. After good-byes and thank-you’s, Dodson left the interview around 5:30 that evening rushing off to another project. Dial and I packed up our equipment and followed him out of the room about five minutes later.