STEP ON BOARD

When the Mighty Wonders of Aquasco, Maryland recorded their first single in 1972 – an acapella version of the gospel standard “Old Ship of Zion” – they never imagined that their 45 rpm disk would become the unofficial anthem of the Black Gospel Music Restoration Project. But its simple refrain (Step on board if you want to see Jesus / Step on board and follow me) provides a powerful, emotional appeal that speaks to our search for stability in the midst of life’s storms, and it does so for a new generation of gospel fans as part of the permanent Royce-Darden Collection.
THE PURPOSE OF THE PROJECT

The purpose of this project is to identify, acquire, preserve, record and catalogue the most at-risk music from the black gospel music tradition. This collection will primarily contain 78s, 45s, LPs, and the various tape formats issued in the United States and abroad between the 1940s and the 1980s.

THE HISTORY OF THE PROJECT

The BGMRP was born from a cry of frustration. Baylor journalism professor Robert Darden, a gospel music scholar and author, would routinely find that songs he hoped to use in his research were no longer available for purchase and in some cases appeared to have disappeared forever. An 2005 op-ed in the New York Times about the situation led to a lead gift from businessman Charles Royce and the project began in earnest in 2007. In its first decade the project has saved more than 5,000 recordings and ephemera for public access, with more materials arriving regularly.
The Royce-Darden Collection contains thousands of songs from the Golden Age of gospel. These full-length songs are available to stream from anywhere in the world and each item includes images of the disks and album art (where available) as well as detailed cataloging information. The collection includes songs from 78 rpm disks, 45’s, LPs and cassette tapes spanning from the 1930s to the early 1980s.

The musical styles contained in the project shift from early renditions of “negro spirituals” to mid-century gospel to early Motown-influenced “popular” records. You can track the development of modern musical styles – rock ‘n roll, R&B, blues, hip-hop – in the rhythms, chords and choruses of these modern American treasures.
The BGMRP supports scholars in disciplines like musicology, African American studies, history and many more. In 2016, materials from the project were included in the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of African American History and Culture as part of its permanent Musical Crossroads exhibit. And most importantly, the songs and stories of the BGMRP are fueling daily discoveries and appreciation for the men and women whose hearts and souls went into creating every note.
There are three ways you can help ensure the BGMRP preserves America’s black gospel treasures for decades to come.

Loan materials: The project will arrange to ship gospel albums from your collection to our digitization center in Waco, Texas at no charge to you.

Donate materials: We can arrange to have your gospel materials donated as gifts directly to the BGMRP collection.

Make a monetary donation: Your gift to the Lev Prichard III Endowed Traditional Black Music fund will provide ongoing support for the BGMRP. Learn more at about the fund at http://bit.ly/BGMRP_endowment.