

## For Hodges, music's 'all about love'

By Bob Mehr

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Charles Hodges has seen the light twice in his life.

The first time was as a 13-year-old boy, performing at his eighth-grade graduation.

"The teacher asked me if I would play 'What I'd Say' by Ray Charles. I did and got such huge cheers, a standing ovation. All I could see was the (stage) lights, but I could hear the applause and the whistles," says Hodges. "Right then I said, 'This is what I want to do. I want to be a musician.'"

Some 40 years later, Charles Hodges saw the light again; this time it was God sending out a signal to change his ways. Hodges would do just that, giving up his secular music career and becoming an ordained minister.

In between those two life-altering events, Hodges was responsible for some of the most vital and familiar sounds in all of American music. As the keyboardist for Memphis' Hi Records house band, his signature organ work colored the great hits of O.V. Wright, Al Green, Ann Peebles and Syl Johnson.

This past week Hodges released his second solo CD, *God He's Able*, a collection of soulful spiritual and worship songs.

For the 64-year-old Hodges, the record is just another marker in a long musical journey and personal journey.

The sixth of 12 children, Hodges was raised in what were then the farm lands of post-World War II Germantown.

"It was just a two-lane highway out there," recalls Hodges. "My grandfather owned a good portion of Germantown. We grew up on 20 acres of land. My father, Leroy Sr., was a cement truck driver."

In his spare time, Leroy Sr. also played piano and led his own blues outfit, the Germantown Blue Dots.

"He was one of the greatest blues pianists I've ever heard. He played with people like Memphis Slim, back in the old-time days," says Hodges. "My mother, I didn't know she could play piano. One day she surprised me by sitting down and playing. So I had it on both sides."

Most of the Hodges brothers -- including older siblings guitarist Mabon "Teenie" Hodges and bassist Leroy "Flick" Hodges -- apprenticed in their father's band. By the age of 14 Charles was a good enough musician that he would take the stage at juke joints, playing during his dad's set breaks.

Eventually the brothers each branched out professionally. Leroy formed his own R&B band, the Impalas, with a group of young musicians that included Archie Turner, the stepson of noted Memphis trumpeter and band leader Willie Mitchell.

Teenie became a key player in Mitchell's band in 1965, and soon after Leroy and Charles (who had been playing with O.V. Wright) would also join. A few years later they added drummer Howard Grimes, one of the pioneering young players who had played on Stax's earliest recordings, giving birth to the classic Hi Rhythm lineup that would help shape the sound of Wright, Green, Peebles and Otis Clay.

Part of the unique power of the Hi Rhythm derived from the tight nature of the group; not only were the Hodges blood kin, they were part of a second family, brought up under the tutelage of patriarchal "Pops" Mitchell.

"Willie was just like a dad to all of us. We really fed off of each other's minds and spirits," says Charles Hodges. "We lived and breathed each other and tried to play that way, sharing the pain, the sorrow, the joy, and all those emotions, in the music.

Hodges had always possessed a singular keyboard style, but admits that initially he was afraid to embrace it.

"When I was first recording with Willie I was trying to play like (jazz organist) Jimmy Smith," says Hodges. "One day we were recording and all of a sudden Willie stopped. He said, 'Charles, I don't want to hear Jimmy Smith. If I wanted to hear Jimmy Smith I would've hired Jimmy Smith. I want to hear you, Charles.'"

"From that very moment, everything changed. My style of playing and everything. He always called me "Do Funny" -- that was his nickname for me. 'Cause I started do that funny stuff on the keyboard: the swells, the different chord voicings. I was afraid to play the way I wanted to play. But Willie said, 'Man, be yourself,' and I started being myself."

Throughout glory years of the '70s, and even into the early '90s, Hodges and Hi Rhythm continued.

But, in the late-'90s, he stepped away from secular music.

"I got to the point where I had to discover who I was, 'cause I was lost," says Hodges. "I was using drugs and all that stuff. But when I stopped and gave God my whole life, He taught me how to live."

Hodges stopped playing for a decade, essentially splitting up the Hi Rhythm band.

"But we didn't stop being family," says Hodges.

In recent years, Hodges has been able to reconcile the two parts of his life, remaining true to his church work -- he released his debut gospel CD in 2005 -- while reuniting to perform with his brothers; Teenie and Leroy feature prominently on *God, He's Able*.

He's also returned to playing sessions with younger R&B artists who come to Memphis looking for the Hi sound.

"God gave me that strength that I can go into that studio now, and I don't have to smoke or drink or use the drugs, but I can still have a joyous time," he says.

Mostly, these days, Hodges makes music in church. He performs each Sunday at New Bethel Missionary Baptist Church and Unity Missionary Baptist Church, where he serves as associate pastor.

"At Unity, I help with the choir, and at Bethel, I am the choir; I do the singing," he says.

Hodges adds that he and his brothers -- who made a memorable reunion appearance at the Stax Museum in 2007 -- are currently working on a new album of instrumentals that will likely be out next year.

"Our music was all about love," says Hodges. "And love comes from God. I don't care how it's being projected; you hear it in Al Green songs, O.V. Wright songs, Syl Johnson songs. That's why I continue to play music, because that love hasn't gone away."

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### **Rev. Charles Hodges**

His album, *God He's Able*, is available at [revcehodges.com](http://revcehodges.com).

Hodges performs each Sunday at 7:50 a.m. at New Bethel Missionary Baptist Church, 7786 Poplar Pike in Germantown, and from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. at Unity Missionary Baptist Church, 132 East Poplar Ave. in Collierville.

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