

Reverend Darren E. Butler Sr.
Artist Profile

Reverend Darren E. Butler Sr. was born to be a minister of music. Deeply rooted in the church and gospel music, his earliest childhood memories are of the rich, deliberate tones that resonated from the organ or piano his father, George Butler, played during many a Sunday service. His mother, Bernice Butler, too, was a keyboard player and lovely psalmist, who was a recording artist with her sisters. The sights of his parents' talents being used in the ministry delighted young Darren. The sounds, however, not only enthralled him, they became so ingrained in his psyche, and in his soul, that the first time he ventured to play the piano, he already knew how. There were other strong musical influences, even some from outside his family and the church. Altogether, the result after nearly forty years of life, is a divine gift, nurtured here on earth, that Rev. Butler has for composing a diversity of beautiful music and writing lyrics, all to the glory of God. In Rev. Butler's words, "Music allows me to express the love relationship I have with the Lord and to allow individuals to realize that they can have the same love relationship with Him."

Accepting the call to become a pastor eight years ago, Rev. Butler today is Pastor of The Gospel Church in Hicksville, N.Y., a ministry he described as having "an intense desire to interact with people from all cultures, ethnicities and nationalities." He also is Minister of Music at Bethel AME Church in Freeport, N.Y., where Dr. Harry J. White II is Pastor. In addition, Rev. Butler is the MPC Youth Choir accompanist, working with the group's director, Natalie Bethea, at Memorial Presbyterian Church (MPC) in Roosevelt, N.Y., where Rev. Reginald Tuggle is Pastor. Rev. Butler's aspirations, as related to his music and his ministry, are "to be established as a successful songwriter and publisher (he has written more than 125 songs) and to allow the Creative Arts Ministry at The Gospel Church to grow to a level of professional excellence and state-of-the-art relevance." He also has an ever-increasing desire to mentor younger artists, especially in the discipline of music ministry.

In 2000, Rev. Butler began working with *Serenity*, a Christian and gospel music quartet founded in 1999 by Dr. Stanley Ralph, Minister of Music at MPC. The quartet's members – Natalie Bethea, Jolene McClean, JuJu Quinnonez, and Nichell Taylor Bryant – relish singing the Lord's praises and are blessed to have nearly all of their music written by Rev. Butler. His musical styling and lyrical genius have been the perfect recipe for *Serenity's* successful and distinctive sound. "*Serenity*," Rev. Butler said, "is a group of young ladies that has a unique ability to express my music. Also, they are a group of women with whom I feel a sibling-like camaraderie." Rev. Butler and *Serenity's* work together includes ministering through concerts, singing at church services and special events. The group also is in the recording studio.

Highlights of Rev. Butler's musical resume through the years include a recording in 1987 of a 12-inch single titled "Arise and Build," which he co-wrote with Kirk Lyons Sr. The single was released by his former place of worship, the Fountain of Life Church in Uniondale, N.Y., where Bishop Norman Lyons Jr. is Pastor. Rev. Butler also participated in a live recording of his song "Leave Them There," during Mike Brooks' 1992 Conference as part of the Young Artists for Christ Workshop. In 1994, Rev. Butler played live for "Mom and Pop" Winans as well as for Alvin Slaughter at a concert in New York City. Most recently Rev. Butler was invited to grace the silver screen in the role of a keyboard player in the band of a rap artist portrayed by comedian/actor Damon Wayans in the movie "Marci X" slated for release in 2003.

Rev. Butler lives in Freeport and is married to the ever-endearing Patricia Butler. The couple has four children: Qiana, Adara, Kimberly and Darren Jr.; and a grandson, Isaiah.

The Making of a Godly Musician

Q&A with Reverend Darren E. Butler, Sr.

Q: Where were you born, and where did you grow up?

Rev. DEB: I was born in Brooklyn, N.Y., on April 18, 1963. I grew up in Newburgh, N.Y., then in Hempstead, N.Y.

Q: What might someone who knows you as a pastor and musician be surprised to know about you?

Rev. DEB: I worked in corporate America for 17 years, primarily in financial services.

Q: What are some of your earliest musical memories and influences?

Rev. DEB: I remember my father's vast collection of LPs, primarily gospel, maybe a little bit of Motown. I remember accompanying my father on many Sundays to the New Hope Baptist Church in Newburgh, where he was the organist for quite a while. I remember going with him there and watching him as a church musician. Sometimes he would sit us on the bench behind him, and sometimes he would sit us on the bench next to him. He taught songs and directed the choir. He started out playing as a young boy with the church that he attended. He came from a very musical family. From what I can remember, all of his 10 siblings, except three, played. My mom was also a church musician who played keyboard and sang. She and her sisters sang semi professionally and made several gospel recordings. Dad's still a church musician. He's been doing it well over 50 years, at least.

Q: How did you learn how to play the keyboard?

Rev. DEB: I learned how to play listening to the Hawkins brothers and also to Andre Crouch, but it was primarily the Hawkins brothers. It was about the mid 70s, and, at the time, the older gospel pioneers didn't grab my attention like they do now. The Hawkins brothers and Andre Crouch represented the closest expression of where I was as an individual, as far as where I was with rhythm and sound. They afforded me a much more contemporary alternative to what the older folks were doing in church at the time.

Q: Were there any secular music heroes or influences in your life?

Rev. DEB: Stevie Wonder was a musical influence – his melody, lyrics, voice, chord structure and arrangements. One of the albums that had the strongest affect on me as a musician, on me as an individual was *Journey through the Secret Life of Plants*. Earth, Wind and Fire had a particular influence on me. I found myself listening to a lot of pop music as well. I tended to listen to songs that were along inspirational themes and certain types of love songs. Karen Carpenter, she was a vocal genius. As a musician, you're of course going to listen to diverse musicians, but I'd say those artists had a more profound impact on me as a musician.

Q: So you're primarily self-taught on the keyboard?

Rev. DEB: Yes. One of my father's sisters bought me a Magnus organ. It sounded like an accordion but a little more updated. I sat down and listened to the Hawkins' *Love Alive* album, and whatever I heard on that album I reproduced. I was about 13 years old. This was the first time I picked up a keyboard and learned I could play. I just sat there and listened to the pitch and the tone and matched to the keyboard what I would hear. It was as if I were supposed to be doing this. There wasn't a real big deal made of it by me or by anyone in my family. I didn't know any better to realize that normally I wasn't supposed to be able to do this.

Q: How did you develop your gift?

Rev. DEB: From age 13 to about 15, my development as a musician was a long, slow, drawn out process. But at 15, my real exploration of musicianship started with my high school chorus teacher when I was a freshman. She was a major force in the early stages of my development as a musician.

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What she challenged, or rather demanded, that I do every day was bring to school the tapes of whatever music I was listening to and master the music on the piano, and that's what happened. Of course the Hawkins brothers and Andrea Crouch were the primary ones at that time. Instinctively I developed the knowledge of the scales by ear and could tell by playing what didn't fit. She also tried to teach me music theory from the choral perspective.

Q: *So did you learn or are you learning traditional music theory?*

Rev. DEB: I'm certainly learning more all the time. I'm still developing as a musician, always adding to my skills. I always endeavor to improve.

Q: *How old were you when you wrote your first song?*

Rev. DEB: I was 19. The most important influences on me as a songwriter have been the Winans, particularly Marvin Winans, and my cousin Pastor Leroy Woodside Jr. of Uniondale.

Q: *So how did you get into music ministry, and did that help your development even more?*

Rev. DEB: After I mastered the *Love Alive* album as a teenager, there came a thirst to want to do more. The next level of development was in the church that I was a part of at the time, the Mount Sinai Cathedral Church of God and Christ in Brooklyn, which was loaded with musicians. There was a very healthy, ripe atmosphere for musicians. At the time, the senior musicians were very open to mentoring young musicians. I began to, more or less, watch and keep company with those musicians, and in service I'd take advantage by playing in church. But those opportunities to play during service were few and far between because there were so many musicians, about 16 at the time. Then Bishop Clarence Louis Sexton, who was living at the time, assigned me to be the accompanist for the church's glee club. He gave me my first entry into visible music ministry. From there I just kept growing musically, playing and conducting a choir and teaching songs, directing. Then the most pivotal moment in my music ministry development came when I was 17 years old. That summer, one of my father's sisters wanted to do something different with her church's music dept, and she asked me to come to serve as the resident musician. I'll never forget that, because I served in the capacity of the minister of music, teaching coaching training, playing for services, the whole gamut. Her church was also in Brooklyn, the Zion Temple Church of God and Christ with Elder Aubrey Baker, Pastor. Looking back on it now, it was my music ministry internship. That experience brought me into the realization that I was put on this earth to become a minister of music. That was my divine and ordained purpose.

-Nichell Taylor Bryant