

Reverend Carl Bean

Carl Bean was a singer, activist, and minister born in Baltimore, Maryland in 1944. He moved to New York City at age 16 to pursue a career singing gospel music and was eventually offered a contract with Motown. Bean sang the hit disco track, “I Was Born This Way,” which quickly became a gay anthem of the late 1970s. In 1982, Reverend Bean was ordained and founded Unity Fellowship of Christ Church, a welcoming and affirming church serving gay and lesbian African Americans. By 1990, Unity would become incorporated as the Unity Fellowship Church Movement, a Protestant denomination with congregations nationwide.

To learn more about Reverend Bean, visit the LGBTQ+ Religious Archives Network:

<https://lgbtqreligiousarchives.org/profiles/carl-bean>

Document A: Excerpts from “Carl Bean | Oral History,” *LGBTQ Religious Archives Network*, 2008.

John S: Who are you?

Carl B: I am really a church boy. When I think of myself, I think of Grandmother carrying me to church in Baltimore in the ‘40s. I was sharing with my bishops this week, one of the things that was a call for me was the sound of the feet of the women of the church as a little boy, that sound that hollow wooden floor made as they kept time with their feet. And I was sharing that it is so African, and it’s so rich and it’s so real. And it was the call to worship for me. I didn’t have a name for it then. But I remember so well out of all that took place there was always the memory of that double time signature that they kept with their feet. And somehow I understood the depth of that particular thing taking place, what it meant to them and what it did for them.

And it also called me to that room. We would leave Baltimore and we would go to Virginia, which is where they had come from before going to Baltimore...And in this cemetery they buried a lot of the seniors, the elders. And I remember the tables on the church ground and the meals being cooked, and all of the joy of sharing that meal. But the thing that still stands out to me is in the midst of that, they would gather in for that afternoon service. And it was more of a prayer service. It wasn’t as formal as that sacred morning worship. And the way people began to leave those tables was the sound of that congregational singing. Without piano, without organ. And the time was simply what they did with their feet and their hands... But I remember that,

and I remember the call and response. Not so much like what we do today, but a different kind of call and response. It was a rhythmic call and response and the women were kind of singing in an alto voice, a very heavy, resonant voice, and they would kind of answer the men. And that is just the point at which my theology begins today is there. The call of God, for me, was in Mulberry Baptist Church, down there in Richmond County, Virginia, where I recognized for the first time the sacred call.

The voice of God beckoning me in my heart to come into that setting where most of the children were not, as a matter of fact. The children were outside playing between the graveyard and where they were eating. But for me, I needed to be inside that building taking part in that. So I am authentically a black Southern church boy who is African in every sense of the word. Because all that is African excites me. It causes me to come alive. It causes me to transcend whatever might be going on. Those rhythms, the swaying, the way of movement, all that is black church is authentically who I am...

And it was chants. I remember, I don't remember the words, but they weren't the gospel songs. These were chants that had come out of the field that they would sing and that the older people knew so well. So I'm talking about being connected to the religion of slaves. And what a privilege to really know that's what I come from and what I was nurtured in. And it was so real, and it was so authentic that as I sit here today, it's still real in my heart. I still hear them, and I still know it's the voice of God as I hear their voices. Because what it said to us, that this is a time when they could have been dragged out of that church and hung by a tree, it said that this power is present with us in this Southern experience. And also, the words they were singing were talking about it being a deliverance from the experience. So their theology was so big and so real and so broad.

And probably one of the earliest songs that I ever knew and still love to sing around the house is, "Oh, Mary, don't you weep, don't you moan. Pharaoh's army got drowned, oh Mary, don't you weep..." Then, it was probably the rhythms and the harmony. Now I realize what they were saying to each other. No matter what they'd gone through in those counties, in the backwoods, that when they sang that to each other, "Oh Mary, don't you weep, don't you moan, Pharaoh's

army got drowned, oh Mary, don't you weep," was no matter what the sheriff is doing, or his posse, or the Klan, Pharaoh's army got drowned. We will survive this. Because the very fact that Pharaoh's army got drowned meant that they found freedom on the other side in the Promised Land. So they'd taken that story from Old Testament knowing that it applied, that God was still that God, and was still working for them. So today when I think about that, I am much more in the process of looking at the theology that was passed on to me prior to the classroom. What made me a believer. And that's what really made me a believer.

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The other part of that, for me, was Cousin Carroll. Cousin Carroll was my mother's first cousin. And Cousin Carroll was a gay man. And Cousin Carroll's lover or mate was Andrew. And so for me in my home in Baltimore, the family came to Baltimore for Thanksgiving... Well, Cousin Carroll lived in Washington [D.C.] and worked for the Treasury Department. He had come from Richmond County and Mulberry Baptist, and he was a gay man. So I came up from as early as I can remember with the image of Cousin Carroll and Andrew being at the dining room table for Thanksgiving. So I was introduced to, I didn't know the word "gay." I didn't know any of that. But I knew Cousin Carroll, and I knew I was like Cousin Carroll. And I knew that the whole family, all of the cousins, aunts and uncles, some preachers, their wives, they're around the table. But there was also Andrew and Carroll, sitting side by side, just like every other couple, sharing the meal and down South, at Mulberry, Cousin Carroll was one of those voices that came home to sing. So Cousin Carroll was that male gay voice who they looked forward to Carroll coming home to sing...

And I loved to sing. Singing was how God nurtured me, and I often share with my parishioners, whenever I left the house in Baltimore to go to the grocery store, I sang. It was my balm in Gilead. The minute my foot would hit the pavement, I was singing. And years later, I went home after being with the Bradford Singers and I'll never forget Miss Jordan down the street who used to have me do errands, mop her porch, make a little money. She called me, and my nickname in the neighborhood in Baltimore was Sammy. And she said, "Sammy, is that you?" Because I was going to the store for my mother, going down the alley singing. She came to the back door, she said, "Sammy, is that you back there?" And I said, "Yes, Miss Jordan." And she said, "Come on

in and let me hug you, boy.” And I went in, and she said to me, she said, “No matter what was going on, when you came through that alley singing, all of us knew everything was going to be all right.” And I had no idea that that was happening. So here I was somehow continuing this African tradition in America, in Baltimore, I had become that person who through song and ritual went from village to village and made everything okay. And I didn’t even know that, it was part of who I was. It was just what happened for me internally.

So that, having that core is how I think Unity [Fellowship of Christ Church] was allowed to come through me. Because there was Cousin Carroll and Andrew. So I wasn’t introduced to gay people as something in a bar or in the gutter, as it were. These two people, first of all, he was Mom’s first cousin. Most of them were women. He was the only male. They loved him. He fit with them. Carroll was somebody special to them, so I also saw them celebrating him. And him mixed in with them so I didn’t see like gay was separate... There was something for me that came before what the world said about “those people.” “Those people” were one of the family. So there’s a difference there. And I know that that is a big part of who I am today because of Cousin Carroll. And I’m very grateful for him being present, he and Andrew, being present and being a church man, and being a gospel singer. All of that. Because it gave me surefootedness that I don’t think I would have had otherwise.

...

I just loved the church. Wanted to be, I would leave school, stay on the bus, go down to the church, just to help the secretary run the stencil for the program. Because I just loved being in the environment. And Reverend Wood saw it and nurtured it. And he would just, you thought I lived in their house half of the time... He would take me places. Because of Providence [Baptist Church], I was introduced to the Jackie Robinson Youth Council of the NAACP, very young. And this one, in Baltimore, Lilly Jackson, Miss Jackson was the architect of the lives of the young people in that church tradition. Miss Jackson was known at the time for having established the largest branch of the NAACP, which was in Baltimore. Miss Jackson went to Sharp Street United Methodist Church. I will never forget. Because it’s where we had our meetings, in the basement of Sharp Street... We were trained then, I had to know why my people were marching. And we had to know what our part was in this thing. And so they would put chairs around in the

basement of this church, march us around, say the epithets, throw water, tell us that was going to be spit, how we couldn't react, what it is we needed to do, and how people needed us. So if you couldn't do this, you couldn't be a part of the whole lunch counter thing. Now I'm talking about elementary school here. This is all of this, going through all this in elementary school.

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*** Disclaimer! The following section discusses a mental health crisis and hospitalization experienced by Reverend Bean. Please read with caution and skip if necessary.**

I dropped out in tenth grade... That was the year everything hit the fan. One of the persons within my church journey who had been being intimate with me somehow had something happen in his home. And he shared with them that he and Carl had done whatever he told them. I don't know what he told them. Anyway, that family was also on the block, also going to Providence. So they came across to talk to my family about what had happened with their son and me. Dad, who had always been extremely loving with me, just became this animal. I didn't know who he was! It was like, what's going on here? And it became so ugly and so different. Here I'd been so nurtured and so loved and so cared for by neighbors, by church, by family. And this information came forth.

All of a sudden, there was this embarrassment, I believe, because I was carrying the torch... So when this block came through me, then everything changed for them, and they decided to focus on me because it was too painful to focus on what they felt were their shortcomings. Now I can articulate it. Couldn't then at all ... But anyway, it got so bad till it was I was going to eat off different plates. Then I wasn't going to be able to use the silverware, because you know what they do. So I wound up with this pie tin that was aluminum, and an aluminum cup. And so I was going to be separated out. And so now all of the stuff that I had made it over, coming from the other people, not being my real parents, now all of this came up in me.

And I remember going upstairs, I wrote a note which I still have... Left a note in the bathroom, went in my bedroom and pushed my little chest of drawers up against the door. Well remember, I'm the little singer, I'm always busy, I'm making noise. And it was very odd, I guess, Dad, who loved me emphatically, but, I think, was trying to prove to Mom, whatever. So when he didn't hear, something caused him to come up those stairs. And he usually went to bed before she and I

did. And went in the bathroom, and there was the note. I was already, basically, out. And he forced his way into the room. Pushed back and pushed that chest of drawers away. And I just remember then being real groggy and winding up at the hospital that was closest...

What the family didn't know that night was by law they couldn't release me to go back into that environment... And it was the best thing that ever happened. God stepped in right there... And there was a woman, a registered nurse, a black woman, who was on the ward and talked to me. And she said, "Don't worry about nothing. My brother's just like you." She named him. And I knew him from one of the sister churches on the... side of town that I came from. I knew him... She was a Godsend. I no longer felt alone or isolated or that I was in a strange environment. Here was a black churchwoman who was an RN, so she brought all of that the church brings was within that white uniform with her. So when she would embrace me or hug me or hold me, she was bringing me back to wholeness and back to life. I really no longer wanted the suicide thing. It was much bigger than whatever the psychiatrist could say to me. Here the church was again, boom, here comes Christ. All right, I got you, come on, come on home. And I remember so well how every day I would look forward to her shift, and her showing up...

And the other thing, fortunate for me, was Reverend Wood, because of his education, made sure to be at that hospital and do pastoral visits. And they were kind and comforting. And he was not from that other school. The homosexuality didn't cause him to push me away. I never heard a sermon in my childhood church about Hell and Sodom and Gomorrah, nothing like that. It was foreign for me. I learned that stuff after getting into Gospel... So I didn't know a God that was fearful or that I should fear and I'm going to spend eternity burning. I didn't know anything like that. Thank God... But anyway, Reverend Wood was present, the nurse was present, so the black church was present, even in the psych ward, present. Christ, therefore, was present. So all that was in me around childhood prayer, what was sung, was resonating in my heart, up and down the halls of the hospital. And I was singing, I remember the song coming back.

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I hear this boy that sings soprano like Bobby from St. Louis, the Raspberries. I pull him out, a couple of kids sings good second lead. I said, "Look, I'm starting a group, I don't know where it's going to go. I don't want to sing gospel. I want to sing message..." And then other groups

were doing message music... So anyway, we sing. I rehearse these things, I write these things, I send a demo. There's this place down the street from the gay bar in L.A. And I read up and the man says a hundred dollars you get the master tape, demo, da, da, da... So I say okay, that's it. So I call the man, he tells me of an appointment. My little group is rehearsing... We rehearse, rehearse. So we do them and I came home from Prudential that day and the lady said, "Carl, you've got a call. It sounded really important. They said for you to call them right back."

So I open up the little message, and it says, "Call Lee Young, Senior at ABC Paramount." They've given him permission to do this progressive gospel music for ABC Paramount. He likes what I'm doing. He calls me... I'm telling you, only God! Only God, man! I couldn't have done it, no kind of way could I have done any of this stuff and not in a million years... [Lee Young] loves my voice. He likes the gospel voice... He said, "I just talked to the Williams Brothers. These are some young boys from so and so. And I just signed—"

John S: Mississippi.

Carl B: Yes! "And I just signed so and so and so and so. And we want to sign you..." So anyway, I do that. Then Lee leaves there, gets hired by Barry Gordy over at Motown. Lee plays the gospel thing that I did, which is really message music. Barry hears it going down the hall. Barry goes to Lee, asks him who's that. Lee tells Barry, "His name is Carl Bean." Barry listens further. They getting ready to try to conquer the disco market, gay market. So I guess Lee told him who I was, and everything. Next thing I know, I'm at May Company now, left the Prudential, working at May Company part time. Phone rings, "This is Motown Records." I think these are friends that have been out here in the business. I go off. "You know I hate this job! Why would you all play this joke?" I cussed those people out. [*laughs*] Three times!

So they finally said, "No, no, no! It is Motown! It really is! We're going to send a messenger. We like your voice. Mr. Gordy's interested in you... And there's a song he wants you to sing." I said, "Yeah." Eric was my good friend the actor. I said, "Eric, when I get off, I'm going straight to your house and knock you upside your head..." but sho 'nuff, I'm talking about thirty-five minutes later, this white boy comes up the escalator, delivery boy... Walks up and goes, "Are you Carl Bean?" I said yes. "This is for you. Would you sign for it?" I signed. It's a package

from Motown... I'm standing there, first of all, totally crazy. People do anything to get with Motown, anything. Send demos, you know, here is God, God, God! I open the package. I'm walking through lighting, and there are these guys who are laughing at me, criticizing 'cause I'm happy, carefree and gay. Ain't a fault. It's a fact. I was born this way. Now I won't judge you, don't you judge me. We're all the way nature meant us to be happy, carefree and gay. I was born this way. Now not only am I offered a contract by Motown without even pursuing Motown, but I'm allowed to be who I am on the biggest label that ever made it in black music.

John S: That's something.

Carl B: Ah! I'm going like what is going on? I don't believe what's, now I'm calling Eric and friends and going, "You're not going to believe what just happened?" "Carl, what?" "I've just been offered a contract with Motown to sing about being a homosexual!" Now none of them are believing what I'm saying! I go home, crying. I'm walking the street from the store to my house in tears. And I'm just thanking Jesus, just thanking him...

And so I say, I call [my friend] Estelle. She's in. I said, "Estelle." So they bring me in. We go to the thing, the lawyers ask: "Going to sign this? Yeah, I signed. I'm knowing this is the Holy Spirit. I'm knowing this so unnatural, so not normal for the business, for someone to come looking for you to give you money to sign you... So now when I tell people, they say, "Well, bishop, when did your ministry start?" We used to deal with, '82, '85 when we got the 501C3 and all. But now I always say '77...that night, that motel, when I stood at that mike... When the riff comes, and I found myself singing, "Lord, help me tell the word." And I was born this way, from a little bitty boy. I was born this way. I call this, they said well, we got the Sweets. I said, "Uh uh. I need gospel singers. And I want the Sweet Inspirations." They said, "Okay, if that's what you want, get them." I called Estelle, I said, "Can you all do it?" And she said yes... So it was me, it was [my friend] Vernon, and Estelle Brown. The Sweets did the background. And that was really the beginning of this ministry, if I really look at how God charted the course.

Because God brought that song. And in it, when I hit the riff, I began to sing about my life. I began to sing from a little bitty boy, from a little bitty boy. And began to sing parts of my life. And then they called me after they released it and said, "You know, Carl, we're getting letters

from all over the world...” Then I did *Soul*. *Soul* was a popular magazine at the time, black music. And when I look back at that article today, all I talked about was how Jesus Christ brought me to this place, and how I knew the lord wanted me to be open and honest about my life. And that the Lord was using me to free other gay and lesbian people who really loved the lord and really loved the church and really didn’t want to be kicked out or thrown away. And I knew that this was not a course that I had charted, but that the hand of God of Providence had done this because I could have never in a million years thought of this. I would have never thought about writing about being openly gay for a song. None of this would have flowed from my natural intellectual. This was the Holy Ghost. This was God. This was what God wanted me to be about. And so that was real clear to me once it happened.

And then, to put the period on it, one day Motown had called and said, “Your other check is ready.” So I go out on Sunset to get my check. And when I got off the elevator, there my picture was finally up in the lobby with Ross, everybody who was anybody. And I said, “Only you, God.” And when I came down in the elevator, there was this young boy crying. And I said, “What’s wrong?” And he began to tell me he was a holiness boy out of the Church of God in Christ. And he was gay. And his family had thrown him out. And he didn’t know what to do. And he loved Michael Jackson. I mean, he sounded so much like him, could spin and all, and I knew it was God that had caused this boy to be in this lobby. And he said, “But I know I could never sing for this company, because I am gay.” And I said, “Let me tell you, Sir, I am openly gay, and I’m signed to this company.” He said, “What?!” I said, “Where are you staying tonight?” He said, “I don’t have anywhere.” I said, “Well, come on and go home with me.”

And I knew that the Holy Spirit was saying “...It’s your time to give back. I want you to be a mentor, a father. I want you to be the person in Christ that his daddy wouldn’t be for him is who I need you to be for him. And I need you to share everything I share with you. I need you to share your food with him, I need you to share whatever money I put in your pocket with him. I need you to show him how to take care of himself, show him how to get a job, show him how to put money in the bank. I need you to let me come through you and minister to my child, who I put in your path in that elevator at Motown Records.” Bobby must have stayed with me a month... I said, “Here, you take this blanket, this pillow.” And he said okay. That night he called me Dad.

He stood in the doorway of that bedroom, looked at me with that pillow [on] his head, and he said, “Oh, Dad.” And from then on, he called me Dad... So here was probably my first parishioner right there.

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So from that, the dreams are happening, stuff is going on. I [perform in] the discos, I’m singing. People are rallying. I’m going, “Phew! I don’t know what to do here, lord. I’ve got this love for the church, but you just sent this song, I’m in these clubs, I don’t know how to figure this one out.” And so I [continue] to have the dreams, continue to have the dreams, go through that. I called Estelle one day and I said, “Estelle,” I said, “I’ve got to preach. But I’m not sure what.” I said, “and I know I’ve got to be openly gay.” And I said, “I want you to ordain me.” I said, “I know you’re ordained in O’Neill’s church. I just want a proper ordination. I don’t want, I just want a proper ordination. I just need the papers, because I don’t know what God is doing.” So she gets hold of O’Neill... And Estelle called me back, and she said, “Archbishop O’Neil said that what you have to do is so important that you need full papers that carry the full weight so that no one can mistreat you... They want to give you the full ordination of the denomination. Because the Spirit of God has told him what important work you’re meant to do.” I just hung up the phone. I couldn’t even answer Estelle at that point...

Those people made a full celebration for me that night... So when I walk out of the bathroom at some place that it was, they had all this food, he just said, “What do you want to call this church? Because the lord has said for me to give you a charter tonight, to charter this work.” And I said, “Unity Fellowship.” He said, “What?” I said, “Unity Fellowship of Christ Church.” And he wrote on a piece of paper. And that same night that they signed all the mission papers, they chartered the church. I had no membership. I had nothing but the dreams that the lord kept giving me. And the time that I had spent in the studio with “I Was Born This Way.”

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And needless to say, God continued to lift me. We started to have the worship services, because they asked me that year, and Easter was coming. And they said, “Rev, we’d like to have a worship service.” And I said, “A worship service?!” I said, “Whoa, wait a minute, you all.” “Reverend, we’d like a worship service.” So I said okay, it must be God again. So I went home

and I prayed... And so they rented this place out... this theater had a roof, holes in the roof, pigeons flying throughout. But we did it and they kept coming. They kept coming. Guys with AIDS just kept coming, kept coming. And I didn't have any particular way. I just let God show me. And the first thing I knew was I needed to affirm him. So I told everybody to just put your bibles down, close your eyes, and I started doing Affirmations that black, white, red, brown, lipstick, these words were just flowing. Gay, straight, bi, God loves you just like you are. God is bigger than HIV, bigger than just the word, it wasn't me, it was just flowing...

I sat one night, and something just wouldn't let me go home. And it all flowed out of me, that God is alive in the Christian church, the Jewish synagogue. God is alive in the tribal dance. God is everywhere present... So in that process, I began to matriculate in love like I'd never known it. Because God had me in situations. I remember once getting to a hospital, and they were so afraid of it. Doctors were afraid, nurses were afraid, everything. So they said, "You know, Rev, you need to put this one and this one and this one." And I said, "If I go through that door like I'm afraid of them, how can I tell them that God loves them?" So they said, "But you're taking on your own, you're taking a chance and we can't be responsible." I said, "If I'm supposed to go, let me go. But the spirit is saying to me do not go in there gowned, capped and masked, because you're not going to be able to do what I sent you to do." So I went, and God is so amazing to me... Only God! Only God can minister to your heart in ways like that.

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So the message, the theology, the truth of what God wanted Carl Bean to do really started at Mo West in '77 in that studio. And still to this day continues to reverberate around the world and set people free... And so that's why I tell people, Unity is not mine. It's God's. I am but an instrument, and God continues to draw folk around me that are so broken... So I just count it a privilege to be able to tell people that Jesus is available to anyone and everyone who just say yes to him. And that's really it. It's very little to do with me, and everything to do with God. Who really is love. And my purpose is to live the love that God told me to demonstrate through the message that God is, in fact, love. And that's beyond personification. That's beyond male, female, but love. God really is love. And that that really is available for everyone. And that that

transcends all categories, all theology, all churches. Everything. It's just there and available. For birds, bees, flowers. God is love. And love is healing, and it delivers.



Image: Carl Bean Photograph: [simonandschuster.com](https://www.theguardian.com/music/2021/sep/08/carl-bean-singer-i-was-born-this-way-dies-aged-77) (from The Guardian)
<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2021/sep/08/carl-bean-singer-i-was-born-this-way-dies-aged-77>

Reflection Question Brainstorm

Please use this space to informally brainstorm answers to the following questions. You will have an opportunity to continue developing your responses in our warm-up activity next class.

1. What is one bias or assumption that you had about the relationship between religion and the LGBTQ+ community before reading Carl Bean's story?

2. How did reading Reverend Bean's narrative challenge or change your perspective?

3. What is one thing that Carl Bean's oral history made you want to learn more about?

Sources

- *I Was Born This Way: A Gay Preacher's Journey Through Gospel Music, Disco Stardom, and a Ministry in Christ*, by Carl Bean, Simon & Schuster, 2013.
- "Archbishop Carl Bean | Profile," *LGBTQ Religious Archives Network*, 2016.
<https://lgbtqreligiousarchives.org/profiles/carl-bean>