

PREFACE

The first time I met Rev. Clay Evans was on a brisk summer afternoon in Chicago on Thursday, August 25, 2011. The air outside that morning was cool, as if fall had stolen a few weeks of summer. We sat outside on a patio deck. We had finished all appropriate introductions. I was attempting to communicate my reluctance to take on the responsibility of writing Reverend Evans's biography. At the time, I was serving as an associate minister of a church in Chicago's Hyde Park neighborhood and had many weekly responsibilities. I worried that my busy schedule as a minister would not leave much free time to write a biography. In addition to my ministerial duties, I was in the final stages of writing a thesis for a master of arts program in Vanderbilt University's Graduate Department of Religion. I still had a significant amount of writing to do before my thesis was complete. But more than anxiety about my busy schedule, I felt—if I'm being honest—inadequate for the task. I was unsure of myself. Surely there were more experienced writers who could tell Reverend Evans's story. After all, I hadn't even thought about writing a biography. I looked at Reverend Evans and gave my best speech. I confessed my inexperience. I highlighted my weaknesses. I voiced my concerns.

Reverend Evans looked at me and said calmly, “I want you to be concerned but not worried. You can’t disappoint me. Full speed ahead.” That was his mantra that morning: “Full speed ahead.” Despite my reservations, my gut was telling me that I should say yes. And full speed ahead we all went.

A few weeks later, we agreed to meet at the home of Reverend Evans’s daughter Gail. There I would conduct my first official interview with Reverend Evans. I pulled up to the handsome light-blue house on 116th Place on Chicago’s South Side. Rain drizzled outside. Only a few slivers of sunlight managed to escape the overcast sky. I shut my car door behind me. Raindrops pattered gently on the canopy of tree leaves above me, where they slowed in speed and diminished in substance before dripping on my head. I looked at the house. I knew a special moment in my life would blossom as soon as I stepped through the front door. I was a little nervous, because I was a few minutes late. The rain and a slow-moving train blocking a nearby intersection had delayed my arrival. Still, Reverend Evans’s daughter greeted me warmly at the door. I apologized for being late. She gave me a hug and whispered graciously to me that everyone else had walked in just moments before I had. She, too, had been delayed by the weather on the way from work to meet us at her home. I felt relieved knowing we all ended up arriving almost evenly tardy.

I walked into the dining room. Reverend Evans was sitting at the head of the table nearest to where I entered the room. There were five of us. I could sense we were about to embark upon a very important journey. I felt the weight of

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the task before us. Not that I hadn't before. But just being there, sitting at that table, looking at that dedicated group of people, made me realize that we were there because of a life that had inspired so many more people than were present in that room. I could feel the weight of that moment as I looked upon the faces of those seated at that dining-room table. At the time, we were all still mostly strangers to one another. Yet we gathered eagerly in spite of busy work schedules and many other obligations. The energy in that room was palpable. The task before us was daunting. And my task as the chief writer—to tell the story of a man whose ministry had helped define the culture of an entire city and the gospel music industry—seemingly impossible. It was a heavy burden that I alone would have to endure.

Suddenly, unexpectedly, that weight lifted from me. I didn't feel as alone. I opened my laptop. I placed a tape recorder in front of Reverend Evans. I took a deep breath. And I pressed record. "Thank you so much, Reverend Evans, for your time," I said. "I want to ask you some questions about your life and your ministry at Fellowship Missionary Baptist Church." Reverend Evans grinned gently, almost as if he could sense the mixture of excitement and anxiety coursing through me. "Go ahead, Reverend," he said in that low, gravely, resolute voice. "Full speed ahead."

AUTHOR'S NOTE

What helps make *The Last Blues Preacher* so special is the host of quotes friends, family, church members, and colleagues contributed in the telling of Rev. Clay Evans's story. I want to thank each person whose quote appears in this project for investing the time to be interviewed. Each person's contribution added vibrant testimony about Rev. Clay Evans and the significance of his ministry. I would like to also thank Patty Nolan Fitzgerald and Mary Prendergast for the interviews they conducted when my work schedule and other obligations did not allow me to facilitate interviews. Both Patty and Mary invested an enormous amount of time coordinating logistics for interviews, conducting research, and offering insightful perspectives during my interviews with Rev. Clay Evans.

Quotes from the following people were obtained from interviews that took place in person, over the phone, or through written correspondence:

Timuel Black: Black is a long-time South Side activist, educator, and Chicago historian.

Chuck Bowen: Bowen served as a former aid to Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley.

Dr. Alexander Doolas: Doolas is a retired Chicago physician who successfully performed Rev. Clay Evans's pancreatic cancer surgery in 2001.

Michael Evans: Michael is a son of Rev. Clay Evans.

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Pharis Evans: Pharis is a brother of Rev. Clay Evans.

Faith Evans: Faith is a daughter of Rev. Clay Evans.

The Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan: Farrakhan is the leader of the Nation of Islam.

Rev. Henry O. Hardy: Hardy is pastor emeritus of Cosmopolitan Community Church in Chicago.

Dr. Johari Jabir: Jabir is Associate Professor of African American Studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

The Reverend Jesse L. Jackson: Jackson is the founder of Rainbow/PUSH, a long-time civil rights leader, and a close friend of Rev. Clay Evans.

Reverend Charles Jenkins: Jenkins is the senior pastor of Fellowship Missionary Baptist Church and Evans's successor.

Jack Malone: Malone is long-time chaplain serving Cook County Jail in Chicago.

Rev. Dr. Harolynn McIntosh: McIntosh served for seven years as one of the pastors in the children's ministry at Fellowship Missionary Baptist Church.

Reverend Otis Moss Jr.: Moss is a long-time civil rights activist who offered key leadership within the Southern Christian Leadership Conference during the 1960s.

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Loretta Oliver: Oliver was a long-time soloist in Fellowship Missionary Baptist Church's two-hundred-voice choir.

Father Michael Pflieger: Pflieger is the senior pastor of The Faith Community of Saint Sabina in Chicago.

Dr. Harold Pye: Pye, who passed away in 2016, was married to Rev. Clay Evans's daughter Gail C. Evans and was the owner of a medical facility, HTP Associates.

Gail C. Evans-Pye: Gail is a daughter of Rev. Clay Evans.

Governor Pat Quinn: Quinn is a former governor of Illinois who was in office when he was interviewed for this project.

Lou Della Evans Reid: Lou Della is a sister of Rev. Clay Evans and served as choir director at Fellowship Missionary Baptist Church from 1950 to 2000.

Congressman Bobby Rush: Rush is an Illinois Democratic congressman.

Michael Shaw: Shaw was a long-time pianist at Fellowship Missionary Baptist Church.

Mary Stinson: Stinson was a long-time soloist in the two-hundred-voice choir at Fellowship Missionary Baptist Church.

The Reverend Dr. Stephen J. Thurston: Thurston is the senior pastor of New Covenant Missionary Baptist Church in Chicago.

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Eddie Vrdolyak: Vrdolyak is a former Chicago alderman.

Mickey “Royal” Warren: Warren was a long-time organist at Fellowship Missionary Baptist Church.

Rev. Dr. Don Sharp: Sharp is pastor of Faith Tabernacle Baptist Church in Chicago.