

UC SANTA BARBARA

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[Nora Drake](#)

Voices United

Every Tuesday night, a group of UC Santa Barbara students and community members gather around Victor Bell as he plays the piano. They clasp hands and say a prayer of thanks for life, breath and the chance to reconnect each week. Then they begin to sing.

This is the UCSB Gospel Choir, uniting people in song and the gospel tradition for 25 years.

On Friday, June 3, more than 100 former and current choir members will gather on the UCSB campus for a reunion concert to celebrate the group's achievements and to reflect on the past quarter century. The concert is open to the public.

For Bell, the choir's director for the past 18 years, it will be a chance to catch up with former students and colleagues, many of whom he calls his friends. "Seeing my current students and my former students is always overwhelming for me," he commented. "I've watched them go on to sing professionally or get master's degrees. I still keep in touch with a lot of my former students. Having a musical influence in their lives when they come in as freshmen and having involvement in their lives is important to me. I'm really excited."

"The UCSB Gospel Choir has proven to be an audience favorite time and again, presenting many sold out shows and drawing audience members from all over Southern California," said Jill Felber, chair of UCSB's Department of Music. "The unique community that the choir creates is a source of pride for the department, as

we see students from all over campus, representing all types of majors, coming together to make music. Victor and his choir are guaranteed to put on an incredible show, and we can't wait to celebrate with them!"

The mission of the gospel choir, which is open to anyone who successfully auditions, is to keep gospel music alive through practice and performance. Bell believes in sharing the "good news" (as the word "gospel" literally means) with everyone. "Our mission is to expose the genre, including spirituals and anthems, traditional gospel music and contemporary gospel music embedded within the African-American church, to the community," he said.

Over the years, the gospel choir has had the opportunity to travel, record an album and appear on a television show. The group also performs frequently on the UCSB campus, often outside, so people can discover the music while going about their daily business.

Bell, who began playing music at age 7 and grew up singing gospel, seeks to share his passion for the genre. "Gospel is everything to me," he explained. "It's what I was born and raised in. It's really a part of who I am and how I express myself musically. Just to be able to share my experiences in gospel music with students and other people means a lot."

The upcoming — and historic — will reunite the choir's directors past and present (Bell, Diane White-Clayton and Jimmy Fisher). The group will learn all of the songs for the concert on the day of the show, practicing all day before performing that night. "This is going to be epic," said Bell. "All three directors of the UCSB gospel choir are going to be here. A lot of the alumni from the past 25 years are coming, some of them flying in for the occasion. You can expect to hear songs from the past 25 years."

For the diverse group of students in the gospel choir today, having Bell as a mentor is a treat. "Gospel Choir is one of the greatest communities I have had the pleasure to be a part of in my UCSB experience, due to Victor's amazing direction and his emphasis on family," commented Andre Taylor, Jr. a senior majoring in theater. "Throughout my past few years at UCSB, Gospel Choir has been my home away from home and has instilled lessons of love, forgiveness, hope and more, which I will keep with me for the rest of my life."

For Bell, gospel music, with its message of welcoming all, is a natural fit for the university, and, he said, he is happy for it to have a home on a college campus. “The genre of gospel music is very widespread, even in other countries, and to have it at a public university is really important because it exposes it to people who otherwise would not really know about it,” he explained.

The June 3 concert will take place at 7:30 p.m. in Lotte Lehmann Concert Hall. Tickets are \$15 for general admission, \$10 for non-UCSB students with ID, \$5 for UCSB students with ID, and free for children under 12. Tickets may be purchased online at www.music.ucsb.edu or by calling the Associated Students Ticket Office at (805) 893-2064.

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.