

# NARRATIVE TEXTS

## **“Arizona” Juanita Dranes, 1894-1963, Gospel Musician**

Blind from birth, Juanita Dranes grew up near Dallas’s Deep Ellum and was drawn to the foot-stomping, hand-clapping sounds emanating from the Church of God in Christ. She joined fellow African Americans in the practice of this fervent Pentecostal faith. By her early twenties, she was pounding out spirituals on the piano and shouting out vocals to call-and-response choruses. Some musicologists credit Dranes with inventing the “gospel beat,” barrelhouse-style piano accompaniment derived from ragtime.

Encouraged by a talent scout, she journeyed in 1926 from Dallas to Chicago and the recording studio of Okeh Phonograph Company. In her hand she clutched a letter of introduction from her church. The studio staff was impressed by her original compositions. They recorded six of them in a single day, paying her \$25 per track. No one had ever before recorded a sacred-singing female piano player. Dranes’s powerful, rousing delivery had enormous influence on musicians who followed her in “the golden age of gospel,” the 1940s to 1960s. She recorded additional spiritual songs in Chicago and Dallas, toured with an ensemble from 1926 to 1929, and provided piano accompaniment for other artists, among them gospel vocalists Rev. F.W. McGee and Jessie May Hill.

The Great Depression curbed the visits of talent scouts and the enterprise of Southern music.<sup>5</sup> Dranes made her last recording in 1929. After that she played widely for church services and conventions, traveling with nearmissionary zeal. She is said to have lived, at various times, in Chicago, Memphis, Oklahoma City, and Cleveland. In each place she joined the Church of God in Christ. In 1948 Dranes relocated to Los Angeles, where she lived the last 15 years of her life, dying in obscurity.