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Matters of the spirit can be measured in timely steps.

When Aaron Neville was a junkie in the 1970s, he would climb the stairs of Saint Ann's Shrine in New Orleans. His patron saint is Jude, the saint of hopeless causes.

"You go up the steps on your knees and say a prayer on each step," Neville recalled last week from his home in New Orleans. "To myself, I'd sing 'Ave Maria' or 'The Lord's Prayer.' My brother Art would give me a tape of Sam Cooke (singing gospel). He was reaching for me and it helped me.

"I was looking for a higher power."

The soft-spoken Neville has always included gospel material in his concerts and solo albums, but for the first time in his 33-year career, he has recorded an album of all-gospel material.

"Devotion" will be released Sept. 26 on Neville's own Tell It Records, distributed by EMI Gospel. Expect Neville and his percussionist brother Charles to include some "Devotion" selections when they perform Friday in Tinley Park, outside of Chicago. Featuring headliner John Fogerty, the concert is produced by the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival. It will include arts, crafts, Louisiana food and even the new "Aaron Neville's New Orleans Hot Sauce," peppered with brown sugar.

"Devotion" contains a spicy mix of gospel standards such as the Swan Silvertones' "Mary Don't You Weep" (the rhythmic inspiration for Paul Simon's "Loves Me Like a Rock") and "On the Banks of the River Jordan." There also are secular covers such as Bob Dylan's "I Shall Be Released" (originally intended for the Neville Brothers' 1989 "Yellow Moon" LP) and a tender take on Cat Stevens' "Morning Has Broken."

"Back in the early '70s 'Morning Has Broken' was a saving grace to me," Neville said. "I was in New York, and me and (brother) Cyril were down and out. We'd walk the streets and sing that along with (the Stylistics') 'Betcha By Golly Wow!,' (America's) 'Tin Man' and 'American Pie.' I was away from my family. I was into the drug scene. 'Morning Has Broken' was a bright spot."

At age 59, Neville still has one of the most distinguished voices in American music. He's

previously covered soul, country and pop, but he may be at his best in gospel circles. His effortless, operatic range most closely resembles that of 1940s St. Louis-based gospel singer Brother Joe May, a.k.a. "The Thunderbolt of the Middle West." May and Neville move from a humble whisper to an emotional peak in a four-bar phrase, using spacing for effect.

"Brother Joe May?," Neville asked. "Definitely. When I was a little boy, my grandmothers (Marie Landry and Rowena Neville) would rock me on their knee, and I'd be listening to (New Orleans DJ) Dr. Daddy-O play the spirituals of Brother Joe May, Sister Rosetta Tharpe and Mahalia Jackson. Brother Joe May had a song called 'Like a Tree Standing by the Water (I Shall Not Be Moved).' That song stuck with me all my life."

Technically, Neville said "Ave Maria" is the most difficult song for him to sing. With Linda Ronstadt on backing vocals, the stark gospel ballad appears on Neville's 1991 "Warm Your Heart" record. "That song is so intricate and it goes in so many different ranges," Neville said. "And 'Mary Don't You Weep' \_ Claude Jeter (the smooth falsetto of the Swan Silvertones). . . I can't touch Claude Jeter."

Neville is a former longshoreman, steel mill worker and freight handler. His musical and cultural remembrances form the cornerstone of the biography *The Brothers*, written by David Ritz (who penned the biographies of Ray Charles, Marvin Gaye, Aretha Franklin and others). Broken down into segments of oral history from Aaron, Cyril, Art and Charles Neville, the compelling book is due Sept. 19.

The strongest thread within *The Brothers* is how the Nevilles refused to be stereotyped as men and/or as musicians. Neville has always wanted to record a gospel album, but his previous labels nixed the idea. "But they'd let me put at least one spiritual song on my albums," he said.

Neville never had a spiritual epiphany.

"It took time," he said. "Because I was turning the corner for a long time. I'd turn a corner and wind up on the same block. Finally, I turned it over to God. The song on the album 'Jesus Is a Friend of Mine' made me believe everywhere I went, I was supposed to see what I saw and do what I (did) so I could have compassion."

In 1959, Neville served six months in New Orleans for car theft. And in 1963, while high on heroin and marijuana, Neville was nabbed in the middle of a burglary in Los Angeles.

While doing time, Neville organized a small gospel group among fellow convicts who

were stationed in a forestry work camp east of Los Angeles. "They were like gangsters but they had good voices," Neville said. "We'd harmonize, and I'd teach them songs by Sam Cooke and the Soul Stirrers and the Blind Boys of Alabama. It helped all of us get through that."

A few weeks ago Neville sang for the inmates at the Angola Penitentiary in Louisiana; coincidentally, it's where his brother Charles did time in the early 1960s on a pot bust.

"I saw a friend of mine who had been up there 21 years," Neville said. "I looked at him and just flipped it around. It could've been me but for the grace of God. There's times I wonder. I have friends that are dead, crazy and doing time. God must have something special for me because he's saving me. I always had a song. My buddies didn't have a song, but I always had this voice. Sometimes I didn't have a penny in my pocket, but I felt rich with my voice. That's the only way I can explain it."