

## The Gospel Truth

**E**VERY SUNDAY, Deborah Smith Pollard rises at 4:45 a.m. to start a morning of praise and worship. But she doesn't head to church. Instead she drives to the studio of WJLB-FM (98), in Detroit, where she puts on a set of headphones and welcomes listeners to her four-hour gospel radio show, *Strong Inspirations*. The award-winning announcer plays traditional hand-clapping, soul-lifting songs that wake folks up like a strong cup of coffee. But she also gives air time to the not-so-traditional sounds of Christian rap, or "holy hip hop."

Pollard has produced two outdoor gospel festivals annually in Detroit, drawing tens of thousands of listeners, for 22 years running, and has herself sung in choirs. But gospel is not her only career. She is also an English professor at the University of Michigan at Dearborn. In *When the Church Becomes Your Party* (Wayne State University Press, 2008), she turns an academic lens on her favorite musical genre and its evolution.

"When we started the McDonald's GospelFest, in 1983, we were all wearing pantyhose, high heels on concrete when it was 90 degrees, church-lady hats, full makeup—that's how covered up we all were. Fast forward to 1995. We had CeCe Winans, Vickie Winans, Helen Baylor—all big gospel stars—and Dottie Peoples. We called them the Divine Divas. And three of the four of them performed in pants. CeCe came out in jeans and a big shirt. In the black church world, this was a pretty big deal.

"One of my mentors in gospel radio, a missionary, Bertha Harris, was really taken aback. She said, 'Cece and Vickie were raised in the church. If they had really been set free, they would not have had

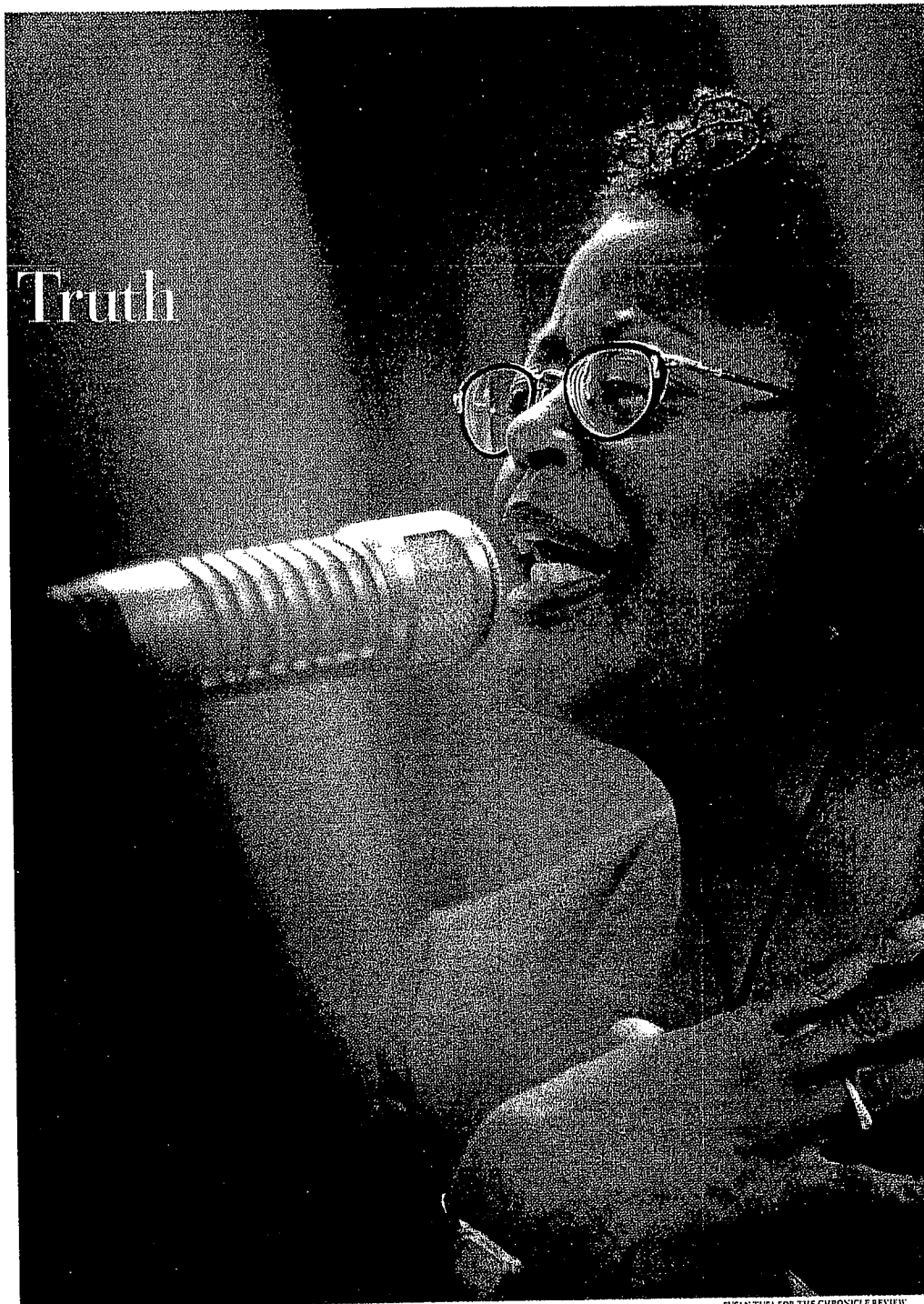
those pants on. That's too close to disobedience.' She was talking about Old Testament Scripture. You know, thou shalt not cross-dress.

"I typed all this up, and I called Vickie Winans and asked her about wearing pants. She said, 'I've been shown a freer way.' I was in full research mode at that point. Who knew that at the time I was ready to

deliver a manuscript, we'd be talking about cleavage, and muscle T-shirts on the men?"

"But despite the changing attire, despite the changing beats, these young people are really interested in evangelizing. It may not sound like your mother's gospel, but the meaning of the text and the intentions are as true as those who came before."

—AS TOLD TO PIPER FOGG



SUSAN TUSA FOR THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

**Deborah Smith Pollard**  
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