

Executive Producer: Linda Berman
Executive Producer: Robin Roberts

MAHALIA

Story By
Bettina Gilois

Written by
Bettina Gilois and Todd Kreidler

Script Polish 10/24/20

A+E STUDIOS

Lifetime Network

© {2020}, Frank & Bob Films II, LLC. All rights reserved. This material is the exclusive property of Frank & Bob Films II, LLC. It may not be distributed and/or duplicated without express written permission. This content is intended solely for internal use by Frank & Bob Films II, LLC. The sale, copying, reproduction, distribution or exploitation of the material contained herein in any form is prohibited.

FADE IN...

1 INT. AUNT DUKE'S HOUSE - NEW ORLEANS - DAY (1925) 1

A powerful **GIRL'S VOICE** mimics along with a blues song playing on a phonograph...

HALIE (O.S.)
*Hello heartbreak,
You're at my doorstep once again,
Why me oh my, my poor heart?*

...as YOUNG HANDS arrange an AUDIENCE of dolls made from tied corn shucks with black felt pieces for faces.

2 EXT. AUNT DUKE'S HOUSE - CONTINUOUS (1925) 2

TITLE: **New Orleans, 1925**

A double shotgun house with a tin porch roof built on a narrow lot of muddy land snatched from the river. Outside the wooden fence, an AUDIENCE of maids, butlers and day laborers gather to listen...

HALIE (O.S.)
*Hello heartbreak,
I'm saying this for the last time,
Won't let you take me down this
road again.*

The audience scatters as AUNT DUKE, mid-50s, white uniform, returns home.

AUNT DUKE
Get off my premises with your mess!

HALIE (O.S.)
*Hello heartbreak,
Why have you left me feeling this
way?
Dazed and confused, now all I can
do sing the blues.*

Aunt Duke stomps inside--

3 INT. AUNT DUKE'S HOUSE - CONTINUOUS (1925) 3

HALIE (13), a barefoot, bow-legged, spindly adolescent in a sack dress, at the phonograph. Her eyes half-shut, singing the blues like a preachment. She does not notice her aunt.

HALIE
*Hello heartbreak, This hurts so
 bad,
 My heart, my mind, my soul's
 desire.
 Gone so fast, my head's a spin--*

Aunt Duke stops the record -- her rage silent.

HALIE (CONT'D)
 (terrified)
 The wash is done...

Aunt Duke takes out a white pocket handkerchief, walks to the potbellied stove...

HALIE (CONT'D)
 (shaking head, NO...)
 The floors scrubbed too...

The handkerchief wiping the stove -- black with ash!

HALIE (CONT'D)
 Please, Aunt Duke, please don't get
 the stick, please...

AUNT DUKE
 Oh, I ain't giving you the stick.

HALIE
 Thank you, ma'am, thank you...

Halie runs to scrub the stove--

AUNT DUKE
 But you ain't getting baptized
 Sunday.

Halie stops -- shaking, fighting tears...

AUNT DUKE (CONT'D)
 God brought me home early to see...
 You ain't ready.

HALIE
 (still fighting tears...)
 But they made my new dress, so
 pretty white, please...

AUNT DUKE
 You don't deserve that dress, you
 don't deserve to be baptized.

HALIE
 (wailing in pain)
 Aunt Duke, PLEASE...

AUNT DUKE
 I won't let you go in that water no
 dry Devil to come out a wet one!

HALIE
 You the Devil!

Aunt Duke grabs Halie rough until she's quiet...

AUNT DUKE
 When you come out that water, you
 got to be perfect. God demands, he
 want your best!

Halie glares at Aunt Duke, silently sobbing.

AUNT DUKE (CONT'D)
 You see I do the best with my gift.
 To heal people who sick, feed
 anybody hungry, raise children that
 ain't even my own. Before you
 baptized, you got to decide, what
 you gonna do with your gift?

HALIE
 I already did! People love my
 singing, tell me all the time. You
 seen them out there gathering to
 listen. That's my gift.

AUNT DUKE
 And you wanna use it whining,
 moaning, singing the blues? Ain't
 people's lives hard enough, full of
 despair. Halie, when you ready to
 come out that water, you'll have a
 special understanding...your gift's
 bigger than you. Your gift will
 tell you how to live, carry you
 everywhere you go, long as you work
 hard enough. You got to deserve it!
 Now clean that stove.

Aunt Duke leaves. Halie wipes the tears off her hardened face
 as a **WOMAN'S VOICE** begins humming "I'm On My Way to Canaan
 Land"...

4 INT. WEALTHY FAMILY HOME - CHICAGO - DAY (1936) 4

...HAND WITH WEDDING RING scrubbing a tiled bathroom floor.

Halie now a young woman, MAHALIA JACKSON, mid-20s. Her legs straight, spirit strong. She works out a song as she cleans.

LOUD KNOCKING.

WOMAN'S VOICE (O.S.)

Mahalia... Are you almost done in there? The kitchen needs cleaning.

MAHALIA

Yes, Ma'am. I'm comin'.

A PIANO plays the opening of "My God Is Real"...

5 OMITTED 5

6 EXT. FIRST BAPTIST CONGREGATIONAL - DAY (1936) 6

TITLE: Chicago, 1936

A giant Gothic church with towering spire. PIANO continues...

7 INT. FIRST BAPTIST CONGREGATIONAL - CONTINUOUS (1936) 7

We are in midst of a rehearsal as the FEMALE PIANIST, late-20s, cues the next singer. From a standing CHOIR OF TEN, Mahalia steps forward. Her eyes half-shut, hands folded in prayer as she begins to sing, low and hypnotic...

MAHALIA

*Oh There are some things
I may not know
There are some places
Dear Lord, I cannot go
But I am sure
Of this one thing
That God is real*

The choir poised and formal while the pianist keeps rhythm...

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

*For I can feel
Him in my soul*

As Mahalia's VOICE rises in strength and tempo, the pianist tries to keep up...

MAHALIA (CONT'D)
*Yes, God is real, my Lord
 He's real in my soul
 Yes, God is real
 For He has washed
 And made me whole*

Mahalia now in a VOICE of MIGHT and HOLY SPIRIT, overpowering all as she sways and stomps, consumed by her frenzied faith.

The pianist frustrated, struggling to follow.

MAHALIA (CONT'D)
*Oh, His love for me
 Is just like pure gold
 My God is real
 For I can feel
 Him in my soul.
 Oh oh oh. My God is real...*

The choir uncomfortable, embarrassed... From the back of the church, the PASTOR enters--

PASTOR
 Stop! Get that twisting, that gyrating... Get that jazz out of this church!

MAHALIA
 (stunned)
 But Pastor, this is how we sing down South. I sang this song the day I got baptized.

PASTOR
 It's blasphemous! You will never sing that way in this church!

MAHALIA
 (deeply wounded)
 Blasphemous?!?... This was my conversion... When I came up out the water, God himself put this song in my mouth.

PASTOR
 This is a church, Miss Jackson, not a nightclub!

MAHALIA
 I only sing in God's name! David said, "Make JOYFUL noise unto the Lord." Don't you read the Bible?

Mahalia leaves... The choir shocked!

Off the pianist, smiling.

8 EXT. FIRST BAPTIST CONGREGATIONAL - MOMENTS LATER (1936) 8

Mahalia storming down the street. The pianist, ESTELLE, runs after her, catches up, hands out four dollars. She speaks with the diction of a radio actor.

ESTELLE
Miss Jackson?

She turns.

ESTELLE (CONT'D)
Here... Your four dollars for singing. I told the pastor he still needs to pay you for the week.
(beat)
It's in the Bible.

Mahalia smiles and takes the money, tucks it under her bra.

MAHALIA
Thank you, Miss...

ESTELLE
Estelle Allen. I wish I could find sheet music for the way you sing. You're from down South, huh?

MAHALIA
Yeah, came up here to go to school, be a nurse. Thought I could earn extra through church singing but that don't seem too possible now.

ESTELLE
If you would like to learn the way we sing in Chicago, you should go see Professor Kendricks. He's a wonderful tenor who gives voice lessons.

MAHALIA
How much do he cost?

Estelle points to Mahalia's chest.

ESTELLE
Four dollars.

9

INT. PROFESSOR KENDRICKS' STUDIO - DAY (1936)

9

A light-skinned PROFESSOR KENDRICKS, mid-40s, behind a piano, sings a grand rendition of the traditional spiritual.

PROFESSOR KENDRICKS
*It's me, it's me, it's me, O Lord,
 Standin' in the need of prayer;*

The tiny studio lined with framed concert programs and newspaper triumphs. Mahalia impatient, waiting for the professor to finally let her sing...

PROFESSOR KENDRICKS (CONT'D)
*It's me, it's me, it's me, O Lord,
 Standin' in the need of prayer.*

Not my father, not my...

MAHALIA
 (overlapping)
...not my mother, but it's me--

PROFESSOR KENDRICKS
 (stops playing)
 Oh, you are familiar already with
 this material?

MAHALIA
 Yes, sir.
 (beat)
 I can only afford this one lesson.

PROFESSOR KENDRICKS
 Why then, of course, let's begin.
 From the refrain...

MAHALIA
It's me, it's me, it's me, O--

PROFESSOR KENDRICKS
 Slower...

MAHALIA
 (slower)
*It's me, it's me, it's me, O Lord,
 Standin' in the need--*

PROFESSOR KENDRICKS
 Slower!

MAHALIA
 (even slower)
It's me, it's me...

PROFESSOR KENDRICKS

(overlapping, booming!)

*It's me, it's me, it's me, O Lord,
Standin' in the need of prayer;
It's me, it's me, it's me, O Lord,
Standin' in the need of prayer!*

(stops playing)

Now again but slower, and with
dignity.

MAHALIA

Yes, sir. But may I please feel my
way through the song a bit further?
I'm nervous.

PROFESSOR KENDRICKS

Why, of course...

Mahalia imitates his formal style...

MAHALIA

*It's me, it's me, it's me, O Lord,
Standin' in the need of prayer;
It's me, it's me, it's me, O Lord,
Standin' in the need of prayer.*

PROFESSOR KENDRICKS

Good... Continue.

MAHALIA

(can't hold back)

*Not my father, not my mother, but
it's me, O Lord,
Standin' in the need of prayer;*

PROFESSOR KENDRICKS

(stops playing)

Alright, enough.

Mahalia's eyes half-shut, lets loose!

MAHALIA

*Not my father, not my mother, but
it's me, O Lord,
Standin' in the need of prayer.*

*It's me, it's me, it's me, O Lord,
Standin' in the need of prayer!*

Professor Kendrick standing, towering over her--

PROFESSOR KENDRICKS

(overlapping)

Young woman, stop that yelling!

Mahalia stops singing.

PROFESSOR KENDRICKS (CONT'D)

That's no way to develop a voice,
it's a discredit to the Negro race.
White people would never understand
you. If you want a career, you will
have to prepare to work a long
time, to build a dignified voice
that glorifies our People!

Mahalia humiliated, looks up to God for help...

10 EXT. CHICAGO STREETS - MOMENTS LATER (1936)

10

Mahalia's eyes watering as she passes a YOUNG FATHER, waiting
in a breadline with his WIFE and THREE CHILDREN.

YOUNG FATHER

(to Mahalia)

What you crying about? Somebody
mistreat you?...

Mahalia slows...

YOUNG FATHER (CONT'D)

Yes, you, Miss... Whatever it is,
he ain't worth it! God say, "Let no
man define you, steal your joy!"

MAHALIA

(stops)

Thank you, Baby... I needed that.

Mahalia looks at YOUNG FAMILY, *What can she do?...*

11 INT. MAHALIA'S ONE ROOM APARTMENT - EVENING (1936)

11

The same Young Family at a small table eating ham hocks and
ribs, potato salad and string beans. As the Young Father
picks up a nearby WEDDING PHOTO: Mahalia joyous in a modest
white gown with a DEBONAIRE GROOM, a decade older...

YOUNG FATHER

This your husband?

As Mahalia pulls a big pan of hot cornbread out the oven of
her tiny kitchenette...

MAHALIA

Yeah, that's Ike. He treats me
good.

YOUNG FATHER

Well Miss, I believe one day you
gonna be famous in this world and
walk with kings and queens.

MAHALIA

(surprised)

My aunt said that to me once...
Told her all I wanna walk with,
a good pair of shoes.

(serving everyone)

Now go on, eat this cornbread.

KNOCKING at the outside door.

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

It's open!

(to the children)

Here, and get you three another
plate before all the food's gone.

Estelle enters, wearing professional attire.

ESTELLE

Hello, hi everybody!

(to Mahalia)

Looks like a big family gathering.

MAHALIA

(brusque)

You could say that.

ESTELLE

Oh.

MAHALIA

This how I grew up. No matter how
poor we were, my Aunt Duke would
feed anybody who was hungry. But I
trust you got enough to eat.

ESTELLE

What's wrong, Mahalia? I came by to
find out how your lesson went.

MAHALIA

I'm not studying high-class stuff!
I'm not singing for white people!
I'm singing in the church, for
myself! And I got no ambition to be
some kinda Society Negro.

ESTELLE

Oh, you wrong you think I don't know hungry! I grew up, every morning and every night we was hungry. There was no Aunt Duke feeding me, so I stuck my ear to the radio, learned to speak this way to make a different kinda life.

(leaving)

You have a good evening, Miss Jackson.

MAHALIA

Hey, Estelle...

Estelle stops.

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

You like ham hocks?

ESTELLE

No.

(beat)

But I like cornbread.

Off Mahalia, as they share a smile.

12

INT. MAHALIA'S ONE ROOM APARTMENT - LATER (1936)

12

An eruption of laughter from Estelle, alone at the table with an empty plate of dinner as Mahalia commands the kitchenette stage, performing a wild caricature of Professor Kendricks.

MAHALIA

Now slower... Slower. Slower! With DIGNITY, you UNEDUCATED DISCREDIT to Negroes!

(formal, poised)

*It's ME, it's ME, it's ME, O Lord,
Standin' in the need of prayer;
It's ME, it's ME, it's ME, I'M LORD
Standin' in the...*

They fall out laughing together.

ESTELLE

Oh, you are too crazy... You really do belong on the stage.

MAHALIA

Only if that stage belongs to God.

Estelle incredulous.

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

You don't believe me? Honey, I been tested plenty. One bandleader, he wanted me to sing the blues so bad, offered to pay me a hundred dollars a week.

ESTELLE

How in God's name could you turn down that much money?

MAHALIA

Cause the "NO" I told him was in God's name.

ESTELLE

So God told you not to sing the blues?

MAHALIA

God say his words would give joy, bring others joy too. I can sing the blues if I want but that ain't the life I wanna live. I already lived too much the blues growing up. During the great flu, my aunt taking care of all them people suffering and sick, everybody wearing them masks. Then my mother died. Anybody singing the blues is all alone, they in a deep pit. I sing God's music because it give me hope and I'm not alone. I can't stand to live with any more pain.

The outside door bursts open--

IKE (O.S.)

Happy Valentine!

Mahalia jumps and screams--

MAHALIA

Jesus!... You scared me!

IKE, the groom from the wedding photo, holding a rolled *Daily Racing Form* like a sword in his hand. A threadbare knight.

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

It ain't Valentine's, you fool.

Ike wraps her in his arms, kisses on her neck.

IKE
Oh yeah? Every day married to you,
it's a Valentine...

MAHALIA
(pulling away)
Ike... We got company...

Ike tosses his racing form on top of the BIBLE on the table
and bows before Estelle...

IKE
Issac Lane Grey Hockenhull. ROTC.
Tuskegee Institute. Fisk
University. From Como, Mississippi
by way of Pine Bluff, Arkansas.

MAHALIA
This is Estelle Allen.

IKE
Oh yeah, from that church that
threw you out. Pleased to meet you.

MAHALIA
Estelle's my new piano player.

ESTELLE
I am?

IKE
I like Estelle. Don't know how she
got you to finally take singing
lessons. I tell Mahalia all the
time, she should be an opera star!

ESTELLE
(to Mahalia)
How do you and God feel about that?

MAHALIA
Oh, Hell no!

Mahalia and Estelle bust out laughing as a PIANO plays the
opening of "Elijah Rock," CONTINUES OVER...

A South Side storefront. Tall display windows, the bottom
halves papered over from the inside. In GOLD STENCIL
LETTERING, the name of the church. Underneath, handwritten in
red paint: "PEACE IS NEVER FAR."

MAHALIA (V.O.)
Elijah Rock, shout, shout
Elijah Rock comin' up, Lord

14 INT. HOLY GHOST SPIRITUAL TEMPLE - CONTINUOUS (1936) 14

Estelle at an old piano on a small stage, her eyes locked on nearby Mahalia singing, wearing a black dress with a cape.

MAHALIA
Elijah Rock, shout, shout
Elijah Rock comin' up, Lord

A SMALL CONGREGATION, most underclass, some rocking in their folding chairs, becoming electrified by her performance.

MAHALIA (CONT'D)
Elijah, Elijah
Elijah

Standing out, a YOUNG WOMAN, early 20s, stylish short hair; on each arm, a heavy gold bracelet. She listens transfixed...

MAHALIA (CONT'D)
Satan is a liar and a conjurer too
If you don't mind out
He'll conjure you
If I could, I surely would
Stand on rock where Moses stood

As Mahalia tears down the house, people rise, clap, shout:
Glory! Amen! Hallelujah everybody!

MAHALIA (CONT'D)
Elijah Rock, shout, shout,
Elijah Rock comin' up, Lord

Estelle keeping up this time!

MAHALIA (CONT'D)
Elijah Rock, shout, shout, shout
Elijah Rock I'm comin' up, Lord

The church builds to an UPROAR, on their feet. But the Young Woman still seated, rapt...

15 INT. HOLY GHOST SPIRITUAL TEMPLE - LATER (1936) 15

After church socializing. Mahalia pulls Estelle aside...

MAHALIA
 Estelle, I couldn't wait to say...

ESTELLE

You're pregnant?

MAHALIA

Oh, I pray for a big family one day but we need money first. So Ike's mother, she's finally selling us her cosmetic formulas. We going into business for ourselves!

ESTELLE

That's wonderful, Halie, I'm so happy for you! You deserve better times.

MAHALIA

I got all her secrets and everything, gonna start to cook up some beauty products tonight.

ESTELLE

I want to be your first customer.

MAHALIA

Magic skin cream cost a dollar.

ESTELLE

Here you go...

Mahalia takes Estelle's dollar, puts it in her bra.

MAHALIA

Ike's so excited to start business, he quit his part time job at the post office.

ESTELLE

(concerned)

He did? But that could turn full time, it's good, steady pay.

The Young Woman with the gold bracelets approaches...

ESTELLE (CONT'D)

Oh, Mahalia. I want you to meet a student of mine, Mildred Falls. I think she could be good for you.

MAHALIA

She right. I almost need a full time piano player now. Somebody who can come on time. Can you keep up?

Mildred looks to Estelle.

MILDRED

Oh no, Ma'am. I'm, well...

ESTELLE

Mildred's been to hear you sing many times but won't ever come introduce herself.

MAHALIA

You think you can bounce, get my rhythm right?

MILDRED

I could learn.

MAHALIA

Come see me when you get confident you can bounce. I'm always looking for piano players. None of the good ones are too reliable.

ESTELLE

Because we can't afford to lose our regular jobs by playing all over God's earth with you.

MAHALIA

God will provide to those who commit to his demands. You got to have a made-up mind, no straddling the fence. Now I gotta get home, start cooking up my new wealth.

(to Estelle)

Remember, we got a funeral to play Tuesday. Come early, I'll bring your magic skin cream.

As Mahalia leaves, wading through admirers...

ESTELLE

That woman's hardly got a stitch to her name but she's a queen.

...Mildred watches in awe.

16

INT. MAHALIA'S ONE ROOM APARTMENT - EVENING (1936)

16

Mahalia at the stove stirring pots of beauty oils and skin creams, humming I'm Going To Tell God.

IKE (O.S.)

Mahalia!

Mahalia jumps--

MAHALIA
Where you been?

Ike waving an AUDITION FLYER...

IKE
Here... Everything we've been
waiting for! Good pay for singing.
No nightclubs! No blues!

MAHALIA
If you quit fanning me...
(grabs flyer, reads)
WPA Federal Theatre Project
Auditions...

IKE
The Hot Mikado! All-Negro cast,
a national tour!

Mahalia slams down the flyer.

MAHALIA
I thought we were starting a
cosmetics business together.

IKE
This is bigger.

MAHALIA
How come when we start one thing,
you quick jump to another?

IKE
Selling cosmetics ain't gonna get
us much further than you hollering
in them churches.

MAHALIA
(hurt)
Hollering?

IKE
You could reach the heights. We
play this right, our lives could be
as big and beautiful as your voice!

MAHALIA
I ain't no horse, running a track!
How about we start living a life
big as your college degree?

IKE

Maybe in a hundred years, college will do a Negro good. Until then, the post office as high as I'm able to climb. Look, give this audition a try. Tomorrow I'll start selling cosmetics. All we need is a little scratch, get us really going. Then we can finally start a family.

MAHALIA

You think we ready?

IKE

Let me prove to you the best kind of man I can be.

Off Mahalia, full of possibility as a TAMBOURINE plays...

17

EXT. SHUBERT GREAT NORTHERN THEATRE - DAY (1936)

17

...in the hands of an 8-year-old boy, YOUNG JOHN, singing **LOUD** outside a former opera house, downgraded to vaudeville.

YOUNG JOHN

*Can you hear the sound?
Coming through the sky,
Like a mighty trumpet,
From the clouds on high,
It's the sounds of Triumph,
It's the sound of Victory,
It's the sign of hope for you and
for me.*

Mahalia arrives, carrying a purse.

MAHALIA

Ain't the auditions in there?

YOUNG JOHN

They say there's no parts for kids.
But figure, I sing loud enough,
they gotta put me in.

MAHALIA

Well I'm figuring about the same.

Mahalia heads into the theater like it's the guillotine.

18 INT. SHUBERT GREAT NORTHERN THEATRE - LOBBY - CONTINUOUS 18
(1936)

Mahalia approaches the audition table in the seedy lobby.
Before she can ask--

KATHRYN
Yes, you're in the right place.

MAHALIA
I'm not so sure.

KATHRYN
We need your name and a telephone
number where we can reach you.
(whispers)
I have a good feeling about you.

MAHALIA
(signing in)
Okay...

KATHRYN
That's it! They're inside.

As Mahalia begins to leave...

KATHRYN (CONT'D)
Where's your music?

Mahalia pulls a "Gospel Pearls" hymn book from her purse.

KATHRYN (CONT'D)
Oh, dear... They won't want to hear
that. You need some sheet music,
a regular song.
(beat)
There's a big sheet music store,
Lyon & Healy, on the corner of
Jackson and Wabash.

MAHALIA
How much do a regular song cost?

KATHRYN
No more than fifty cents.

A TAMBOURINE shakes...

19 EXT. SHUBERT GREAT NORTHERN THEATRE - MOMENTS LATER (1936) 19

Young John singing even louder!

YOUNG JOHN
*Walk with Jesus, Walk with Jesus,
 Walk with Jesus, Come on walk with
 Jesus...*

As Mahalia comes out the theater--

YOUNG JOHN (CONT'D)
 You tell them about me? Did you
 tell them how good I am, Miss
 Mahalia, did you?

MAHALIA
 How do you know my name?

YOUNG JOHN
 Anybody go to church, go because of
 you.

Mahalia notices the empty cup by his feet.

MAHALIA
 You eat today?

YOUNG JOHN
 I will, soon as I get this part.

Mahalia digs in her purse until she has all the money she can
 find in her HAND: *What will she do with this FIFTY CENTS?*

20 INT. SHUBERT GREAT NORTHERN THEATRE - LATER (1936) 20

SHEET MUSIC being handed to a white AUDITION PIANIST...

...as Mahalia steps away from the piano on a narrow stage in
 an old auditorium.

AUDITION PIANIST
 You ready?

Mahalia nods. The pianist begins to play "Sometimes I Feel
 Like a Motherless Child"... But Mahalia's confused, checks
 the sheet music -- the song title's right...

AUDITION PIANIST (CONT'D)
 (stops playing)
 Something wrong?
 (beat)
 Would you prefer a different key?

MAHALIA
 No, it's not that, I just don't
 recognize the arrangement...

DIRECTOR (O.S.)
Have you ever sung before?

A bored white DIRECTOR, seated in the house auditorium.

MAHALIA
Only in church.

DIRECTOR
Great... One final try, then?

Pianist jumps into playing song. Again, she misses intro...

DIRECTOR (CONT'D)
Okay, thank you.

Mahalia takes a breath, closes her eyes, prays for guidance.

DIRECTOR (CONT'D)
Miss?... Miss, are you alright?

MAHALIA
(acapella)
Sometimes...

DIRECTOR
(overlapping)
Miss, we don't have--

MAHALIA
(overlapping))
*...I feel like a motherless
child
Sometimes I feel like a motherless
child*

Mahalia defies the sheet music as she bends and twists the arrangement, making the song her own.

MAHALIA (CONT'D)
*Sometimes I feel like a motherless
child
A long way from home.*

Mahalia connecting with the lyrics in a deep, personal way...

MAHALIA (CONT'D)
*Sometimes I feel like a motherless
child.
Sometimes I feel like a motherless
child.
Oh, sometimes I feel like a
motherless child
A long way from home.*

Overwhelmed, Mahalia stops singing. Beat. Opens her eyes.

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

Thank you.

Mahalia leaves the stage, looking to the heavens.
The Director and Pianist, both stunned into silence.

21 EXT. SHUBERT GREAT NORTHERN THEATRE - MOMENTS LATER (1936) 21

Young John waiting as Mahalia leaves the theater.

YOUNG JOHN

Miss Mahalia, did you get the part,
did you?

MAHALIA

No, I don't think so. They ain't
said nothing, they just sat there.

YOUNG JOHN

Aw man, I thought you could
introduce me to the director...

MAHALIA

Young man, who takes care of you?

YOUNG JOHN

Sometimes my Aunt but mostly I stay
at the church.

Mahalia considers what to do for this motherless child...

MAHALIA

You ever eat peppermint pickles?

22 INT. MAHALIA'S APARTMENT - KITCHEN - LATER (1936) 22

As Young John bites into a fat dill pickle stuffed with a
thick peppermint stick, the vinegar runs down his chin...

MAHALIA (O.S.)

"Seek the Lord where he may be
found; serve him the days of your
youth, so when you grow old, He may
not depart from you."

At the kitchen table, Mahalia and the boy hollowing out Van
Holten's pickles, pounding them with peppermint sticks.

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

My grandfather taught me that when I was your age, right after I lost my mother... Do you know what my Papa meant by that?

The boy's lips purple from the peppermint and vinegar.

YOUNG JOHN

That I should be praying every day?

MAHALIA

Yes, and serving too. Always look to find God in all things.

YOUNG JOHN

I found him, Miss Mahalia! Really! He in these peppermint pickles.

(praying)

God... This the best day of my life!

IKE (O.S.)

Mine too!

Ike beaming, a fist of wild flowers for Mahalia.

IKE (CONT'D)

Oh, Good God, I love my wife!

MAHALIA

(re wild flowers)

Whose garden you steal these from?

IKE

MAHALIA'S HOUSE OF FLOWERS...

See, one day we'll run all kinds of businesses together.

Ike looks over the boy...

IKE (CONT'D)

Alright, hello there, who are you?

YOUNG JOHN

Mr. John Sellers, sir.

IKE

Who's boy is he?

MAHALIA

I've been praying on that.

Ike concerned a beat but then offers his hand to Young John.

IKE

Issac Lane Grey Hockenhull. ROTC.
Tuskegee Institute. Fisk
University. Proud husband of
Mahalia Jackson...the NATIONAL
stage star!

Mahalia shocked.

IKE (CONT'D)

I took the call earlier.

YOUNG JOHN

You got the part!

IKE

Sixty dollars a week! They wanted
to tell you at the audition but
said you ran off.

Ike flings off his sport coat, grabs a peppermint pickle.

YOUNG JOHN

Can you get me a job too? Can you?!

MAHALIA

Yes, John, yes... Hold on, I'll
figure something out for you but
Ike... I don't know... I got this
feeling today on that stage like
I was carrying my mother with me.
I barely knew her but she was
there. Then I go outside and find
this boy without a mother too. Ike,
if I sing *Hot Mikado* then I gotta
live *Hot Mikado*, singing about fast
life and raising Cain, not songs I
believe in. But this boy, this is
how God really answered our
prayers.

IKE

Christ, Mahalia! I'm so damn sick
of this! Can't God answer both our
prayers for once?

Mahalia sees in Ike's pocket -- a *Daily Racing Form*.

MAHALIA

Not when we both don't deserve it.
Not if you don't work for it.

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

How did selling cosmetics go today?

IKE

I figured out how to use my science degree, studying and testing a new handicapping system. Nobody's thinking about horse racing this way. See, I'm using my degree. Please, can't you see we need this.

MAHALIA

Oh, God showing me exactly what I need. If I can't make a living *hollering* in the church then I'm going back to school, open my own storefront, a real business.

IKE

Please don't give up this job...

MAHALIA

John, honey, come here...

John runs over, Mahalia puts her hands on his shoulders.

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

I'm gonna find you a job and I'm gonna give you a real home. Make sure you do better when the time come for you to prove...

(looks to Ike, rueful)

...the best kind of man you can be.

Off Ike, realizing he just lost the biggest bet of his life.

ACT TWO

23 EXT. MAHALIA'S BEAUTY SALON - CHICAGO - DAY (1946) 23

TITLE: **Chicago, 1946**

A thriving South Side storefront with grand windows, flanked by a barbershop and a corner drugstore.

MAHALIA (V.O.)

Got a Valentine from Ike yesterday. Say even though we been apart now longer than we were together, he remember every minute.

24 INT. MAHALIA'S BEAUTY SALON - CONTINUOUS (1946) 24

Mahalia's HAND - NO WEDDING RING, running a hot comb through Estelle's hair. The salon a stylish two-chair shop.

Prominently displayed: a DIPLOMA from *Madam C. J. Walker College of Beauty Culture*. Mahalia now in her mid-30s.

ESTELLE

You think he remember all them
gambling minutes too?

They laugh together.

MAHALIA

Oh Lord, I tried... You know I
wrestled the Devil for that man. I
sometime wonder, "Did I do right?"

Now a young man, JOHN enters with a bag of beauty supplies.

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

Where'd you park my Buick? I didn't
see you drive by.

JOHN

Got a good spot, right in front of
the apartments.

John sets down the keys.

ESTELLE

Oh, you got your driver's
license... Congratulations, John!

JOHN

Thank you, Miss Estelle.

MAHALIA

Are the tires touching the curb?

He has no idea.

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

I just cleaned them whitewall
tires, they better not be touching
the curb.

JOHN

I can check--

Mahalia snatches the keys, exits.

ESTELLE

You think she'll ever let you take
out the car on a date?

As John puts away the supplies...

JOHN

Won't have time. Soon as school's out, we have the revival circuit.

ESTELLE

Why can't she ever be satisfied for a minute? She has a good business, the only colored person I know who owns a whole building, has three tenants paying rent. When will God tell her she has enough?

JOHN

Mama believes he already did, when her record with Decca flopped. That broke her heart more than losing Mr. Ike.

ESTELLE

I hope that's not true.

JOHN

I get scared for her, Miss Estelle. Sometimes it feel like she chasing something so big that only she can see. And I ain't talking about God.

Mahalia enters.

JOHN (CONT'D)

How are the whitewalls?

MAHALIA

Fine, but the rear's out way too far. Somebody take that corner tight, tear off my bumper.

John goes for keys.

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

Move the car when you finish.

ESTELLE

Why are you still doing those summer tent revivals? Between the shop and your engagements here, you're actually losing money when you travel.

MAHALIA

I need to reach the people. Especially them poor folks, that tent going up like Christmas for them.

(MORE)

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

The money will take care of itself.
So long as I can bring something to
the people I'm satisfied. Except...
(eyeing Estelle)
I need a piano player...

ESTELLE

Oh, Lord.

MAHALIA

I can pay you full time salary now.
When you not playing, you work here
like a regular job.

ESTELLE

I hate all that traveling around.
Chicago got everything
I need. But I could keep the salon
running while you're gone. I've
been thinking of going to beauty
school too.

MAHALIA

Well that's good but I still need a
damn piano player.

ESTELLE

I already found you one.

A PIANO plays a fast tempo opening of a gospel song...

25

INT. HOLY GHOST SPIRITUAL TEMPLE - DAY (1946)

25

Mildred at the old piano, her eyes locked on the keys,
pounding fast!

Mahalia on the tiny stage of the empty church, listening,
unimpressed.

Mildred won't look up. Plays harder, faster.

Mahalia looks to nearby Estelle, unhappy...

Estelle nods back, *Give her a chance, Halie...*

MAHALIA

(singing)
Hallelujah...
God is good...
(stops singing)
"Bounce" don't mean fast. Tell her,
Estelle.

Mildred stops playing, won't look up from the keys until...

ESTELLE

Mildred... Why not try that again?

She does, this time slower but more mechanical.

MAHALIA

(singing)

Hallelujah...

God is...

Mahalia stops, losing patience. Estelle steps in...

ESTELLE

Go on, keep playing... First, never look at the piano, keep your eyes on Mahalia.

Mildred terrified, looks up at Mahalia...

ESTELLE (CONT'D)

Now watch her mouth. No matter how much you rehearse, she'll never sing a song the same way twice.

MILDRED

Oh god...

ESTELLE

Eyes, ears, fingers. That's all you need to be.

MAHALIA

(singing)

Hallelujah...

Estelle continues coaching...

ESTELLE

Eyes. Ears. Fingers.

MAHALIA

Hallelujah...

God is good...

Hallelujah...

ESTELLE

Now use the left, give her that bounce...

Mildred picks up the "bounce"...

MAHALIA

*Hallelujah
God is good
Hallelujah*

ESTELLE

With the right, you gotta talk to
her. Go on now, talk to the woman!

Mildred's confidence grows as she begins her first musical
conversation with Mahalia...

MAHALIA

*Hallelujah...
Good is good!*

ESTELLE

Good... Now never stop, never stop,
never stop!

Mahalia lets loose...

MAHALIA

*Hallelujah
God is good
Hallelujah!
God is good!
HALLELUJAH!
GOD IS GOOD!*

Mahalia finishes off the song. Estelle pleased.

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

Estelle, you got to break this girl
in some more. She's got it, but she
hasn't got it yet. I gotta get back
to the salon.

Mahalia leaves the church. Mildred crushed. Estelle smiling.

ESTELLE

You alright? She can be rough.

MILDRED

I thought I did okay at the end,
she seemed happy.

ESTELLE

Oh honey, she's never going to be
happy with your playing. You're
going to have to accept that if you
take the job.

MILDRED
I got it? Really?... You sure?

ESTELLE
Yes, but never expect praise.
Mahalia saves her praises for God.
Remember, she's always searching,
trying to get better. Your real
job, help find her voice.

MILDRED
When's she want me to start?

ESTELLE
She's already packed.

MILDRED
We're traveling?

ESTELLE
I think you start in Mississippi.

MILDRED
Mississippi?

ESTELLE
You don't like Mississippi?

MILDRED
Well I was born there but was a
baby when we left. I haven't
touched the South since.

Off Mildred, worried.

26 EXT. SOUTHERN TWO-LANE HIGHWAY - DAY (1946) 26

Spotless WHITEWALL TIRES spinning on a WHITE '46 BUICK SEDAN
as it drives past, heads down the road. A SIGN reads:
"Welcome to Mississippi."

27 INT. WHITE '46 BUICK ROADMASTER - CONTINUOUS (1946) 27

Mahalia asleep in the passenger seat. Mildred in the
backseat, rubbing her hands. John driving, notices the gas
needle trembling near Empty.

28 OMITTED 28

29 OMITTED 29

30 EXT. GASOLINE STATION - MOMENTS LATER (1946) 30

A pocketknife blade whittling a stick in the hands of a white GAS ATTENDANT as Mahalia's Buick arrives, stops beside the only pump.

31 INT./EXT. WHITE '46 BUICK ROADMASTER - CONTINUOUS (1946) 31

Mahalia waking up...

MAHALIA

Why we stopping?...

Mahalia sees the Attendant approach, circling behind the car to look at their license plate...

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

Oh, Lord, GO...

John, terrified and angry.

JOHN

We need gas.

At the driver's window, eyes scanning inside the car--

MAHALIA

How ya doin', suh'?

Mildred stunned by Mahalia's southern plantation mimicry.

GAS ATTENDANT

Y'all from Chicago?

JOHN

(staring ahead)

Yeah.

The Attendant's face sours.

MAHALIA

I sho' am sorry suh'. Poor boy, he tired, we been driving so long. You kno', we is poor , on our way to sing at a poor little church.

GAS ATTENDANT

Nice car.

MAHALIA

Oh, we be so happy if we could buy
us a little gasoline. Will you help
us do the Lord's work, suh?

The Attendant looks around carefully... Nobody else watching,
nobody sees... Begrudgingly, he moves toward the gas pump.

32 INT. WHITE '46 BUICK ROADMASTER - MOMENTS LATER (1946) 32

Mahalia furious at John.

MAHALIA

You should know, "Esso"! Esso!
Every summer we down here, we only
stop for gas at an Esso station!
Get that in your head.

JOHN

I didn't want to wake you.

MAHALIA

Mmmm Jesus!... Well I'm woke now.

Mildred looking out the window.

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

You not a Southern girl.

MILDRED

No, I'm not.

MAHALIA

I can see you not.
(beat)
You know I got to talk to these
white folks like I don't have no
sense.

MILDRED

I understand why you did that.

MAHALIA

There's a lot of things you gonna
learn, Mildred. For one, when we
get to our "poor little church,"
you'll find out what the Holy
Spirit's really all about.

ORGAN MUSIC and CLAPPING begin...

Clapping PARISHIONERS, FARMERS, SHARECROPPERS in Sunday best, crowd rows of folding chairs in a lit up TENT. Mahalia at the pulpit while Mildred waits at the piano. John standing off to the side. A LOCAL ORGANIST dutifully plays.

MAHALIA

Clarksdale, Mississippi! Thank you
for having us for summer revival!

CHEERING and PRAISE from the crowd.

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

The way I see it, I don't care if a
person is a gambler or a thief, a
wino or a murderer... Every man and
every woman has got to believe in
something, something they can look
up to.

A couple voices: "That's right..." "Say it..."

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

We got to learn to show kindness to
others, especially to those that
feel that nobody cares about them.

More voices: "Go on, Mahalia..." "Amen!"

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

What can we do but help each other?
The earth is full of everything.
So how can we serve God? God don't
need nothing from us but to love
each other, help each other.

The tent explodes: "Sing it!" "Testify!"

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

We all his children!

The audience ROARS. Mahalia launches into "Come On Children,
Let's Sing" as Mildred keeps up the melody on piano.

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

*Hey come on children let's sing,
about the goodness of the Lord,*

Mahalia glares at the organist for coming in late.

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

*Come on children let's shout
All about God's great reward
Guide our footsteps everyday
Keep us walking in the narrow way
Come on children let's sing
Come on children let's shout
Come on children let's sing
About the goodness of the Lord...*

The organist scrambles as Mahalia gets in the spirit, singing at the top of her voice, her hair flying...

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

*He has been my all and all
And he, my Lord, will never
Let me fall
That is why I can sing, good Lord,
That is why I can shout
Because I know what it's all about
The good, goodness of the Lord,
My Lord, good Lord*

Mildred watching as Mahalia moves as if in a trance, her body twitching and writhing...

The audience entranced -- dancing, swaying, testifying...

The organist overwhelmed -- quits playing!

Mildred lets loose on the piano, sharing Mahalia's ecstasy...

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

*Come on children let's sing
About the goodness of the Lord
Come on children let's shout
All about God's great reward
Guide our footsteps everyday*

From the crowd, a MAN rises from his WHEELCHAIR and walks -- crying, laughing, stumbling...

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

*Keeps us walking in your narrow way
Come on children let's sing*

Back-and-forth between Mahalia and Mildred...

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

*Come on children let's shout
I said come on children let's sing
About the goodness of the Lord..Ya
Hey!*

...building to an EXULTANT FINISH to the number. RAUCOUS APPLAUSE.

Mahalia sweat drenched, catching her breath as the WHEELCHAIR MAN nears her, looking drunk, reaching out...

WHEELCHAIR MAN

I can walk... Great God Almighty!
Praise His Name! I can walk and you
did it! In the singing!

Mahalia frightened. John steps in to protect her.

WHEELCHAIR MAN (CONT'D)

Oh Glory, praise God! I can walk!

DEACONS rush over, holding the man back as WITNESSES surround...

WITNESS#1

He ain't walked in twenty years!

WITNESS#2

It's true! Mahalia, it was you!

WITNESS#3

You healed him! You healed him!

Mahalia terrified as she approaches the man, takes his hands, speaks privately...

MAHALIA

You heard God too, didn't you?

As the man begins to bend to his knees...

WHEELCHAIR MAN

You healed me...

...Mahalia holds him up, won't let the man kneel.

MAHALIA

No, baby, it ain't me. I didn't do
this. But you heard him, you felt
him too, didn't you?

WHEELCHAIR MAN

You healed me! You healed!

MAHALIA

No, no, no... It ain't me, you understand! That's God you heard, that's God you felt.

John pulls her away, comforting...

JOHN

Come on, Mama. It's alright...

MAHALIA

I didn't heal that man, you understand me? That's God's work! You understand?

JOHN

No, Mama, I don't understand but it was the singing, the music that made the miracle happen.

Mahalia sees Mildred still at the piano, staring at Mahalia with shocked wonder...

MAHALIA

Mildred... Did you hear God? Did you feel that too?

Mildred nods... Mahalia relaxes, realizing she's not alone.

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

And your playing tonight...
(long beat)
That was pretty good.

They look at each other with the glow of new understanding.

ACT THREE

EXT. APOLLO RECORDS - NEW YORK CITY - DAY (1947)

TITLE: **APOLLO RECORDS - New York City, 1947**

A 16-story brick building on 57th Street & 8th Avenue.

MAHALIA (V.O.)

I pray to make another record like
I pray to find another husband. But
every time I come close to either,
God chooses a different prayer to
answer. You married?

34

INT. APOLLO RECORDS - PRESIDENT'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS (1947)

BESS BERMAN, mid 40s, stylish but edgy behind the throne of her desk. Her walls show off albums from R&B, jazz and blues artists, a couple who became famous – on bigger labels.

BESS

My husband and I started Apollo Records together.

MAHALIA

(surprised)

He's okay with you being in charge?

BESS

He turned the company over to me three years ago. Now he runs manufacturing, pressing the records while I press and shape the talent.

MAHALIA

Do you have a full family, any children?

BESS

Two step kids. Ike's my second marriage.

MAHALIA

"Ike"?... That's funny, that's my ex-husband's name. I ran him out my business too.

Bess stoic, difficult to read.

BESS

How about you, any children?

MAHALIA

You could say I got one, taking after me. He a singer, just moved here to New York in fact, only he singing folk music.

BESS

That's funny, because I'd like to discuss... Well, we may not be big and powerful as say Columbia Records but once you sign, we stay loyal to our artists. I believe Apollo Records is the perfect home for you to feel comfortable...to branch out.

MAHALIA

Branch out?

BESS

(re albums on walls)

You see the variety of artists we record... I think you'd be wonderful, that you could really sing the hell out of the blues.

MAHALIA

Honey, what Negro couldn't sing the blues? That's what life is for most of us.

Bess embarrassed.

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

See, Mrs. Berman, it's just that I'm tired of getting so close to making a record only to find out people wish I'd sing some other kinda way. People don't understand, that pain you hear in the blues ain't got nowhere to go once it get inside you. The blues can't guide you how to live but Gospel, see... Gospel gives you the cure for the blues.

BESS

Alright, Miss Jackson, to be honest, I love your voice but I've still got a bottom line. Tell you what, I can give you two hours of studio time.

MAHALIA

Two hours?!

BESS

That's my best offer.

MAHALIA

I pick the music, need my own people.

BESS

Fine. Do we have a deal?

MAHALIA

Clarify for me please, two hours.
You mean from the time the man push
the button, we got two hours
recording, right?

BESS

Yes, Miss Jackson, you'll have a
full two hours.

MAHALIA

Okay, I can make that work.

They shake hands as a PIANO plays the opening of "Move On Up
a Little Higher"...

35 INT. APOLLO RECORDS - CONTROL BOOTH - EVENING (1947) 35

STUDIO CLOCK: 6:47 P.M.

MAHALIA (O.S.)

*I'm gonna move on up a little
higher,
I'm gonna meet Abraham and Isaac,
Yes I'm gonna move on up a little
higher,
I'm gonna meet the prophet, Daniel.*

Bess exhausted behind the console. Beside her, an angry,
middle-aged, RECORDING ENGINEER. Sitting on a couch along the
wall, RUSSELL, late 30s, boxer's build, wearing a fine suit.
He's sipping on a Coca-Cola, thrilled to be hearing...

MAHALIA (O.S.) (CONT'D)

*Oh I'm gonna move on up a little
higher,
I'm gonna meet the Hebrew children,
Oh I'm gonna move on up a little
higher,
I'm gonna meet brother Paul and
Silas.*

36 INT. RECORDING STUDIO - STUDIO - CONTINUOUS (1947) 36

Mahalia rehearsing, joyous! Mildred on piano, following her
every breath. The RECORDING ORGANIST keeping up too.

MAHALIA

*Yes, I'm gonna move on up a little
higher,
I'm gonna meet King Hezekiah,
(MORE)*

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

*Oh I'm gonna move on up a little
higher,
Oh I'm gonna meet the lily of the
valley*

The RECORDING SIGN flicks **ON**--

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

Oh no, no, no...

MUSIC stops.

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

I didn't say push the button yet.

ENGINEER (ON STUDIO SPEAKERS)

Lady, I can't be here all night.

Mahalia bolts toward--

37

INT. CONTROL ROOM - CONTINUOUS (1947)

37

As the Engineer jumps out his seat, cowers behind Bess as Mahalia enters--

MAHALIA

You said two hours, you didn't say
which two hours.

BESS

Mahalia, we've been here all day.
You made your point.

MAHALIA

I ain't making no point! We
rehearsing until we perfect. When's
the next booking? When!

Bess looks at the Engineer, *Answer her!*

ENGINEER

Tomorrow, 10 A.M.

MAHALIA

Alright, we'll be done by then.
(to Russell)
Why you so quiet?

RUSSELL

So good to meet you, Miss Jackson.
I'm--

MAHALIA
I know who you are.

RUSSELL
Well, I'm honored.

MAHALIA
I know they hired you to handle the colored folks but you need to watch them instead, make sure they don't cheat me out my two hours, you hear?

RUSSELL
Oh, but I don't work for...

Mahalia gone. Russell deflated.

38 INT. STUDIO - CONTINUOUS (1947)

38

Mahalia returns to the studio--

MAHALIA
(to Mildred)
Everything's too flat! You got to come up the scale, work up to my climax.
(whispers privately)
I ain't ever gonna get a chance like this again.
(loud)
Let's pickup...
(singing)
Oh I'm gonna move on up a little higher,

CONTINUE MUSIC OVER:

39 INT. STUDIO/CONTROL BOOTH - NIGHT - A SERIES OF SHOTS (1947)9

--STUDIO CLOCK: 9:13 P.M... Mahalia and Mildred laughing together as Russell watches...

MAHALIA (V.O.)
*I'm gonna meet the Hebrew children,
Oh I'm gonna move on up a little higher,
I'm gonna meet brother Paul and Silas.*

--STUDIO CLOCK: 1:57 A.M... Mahalia pissed, cussing out Mildred as the organist slinks away from the conflict...

MAHALIA (V.O.)

*Yes, I'm gonna move on up a little
higher,
I'm gonna meet King Hezekiah,
Oh I'm gonna move on up a little
higher,
Oh, I'm gonna meet the lily of the
Valley*

--STUDIO CLOCK: 4:35 A.M... Russell bringing coffee for everyone as Mildred steps away from the piano to secretly soothe her aching hands...

MAHALIA (V.O.)

*Twill be always howdy, howdy
Twill be always howdy, howdy
Twill be always howdy, howdy
And never goodbye.*

40 INT. CONTROL ROOM - LATER (1947)

40

As the organist approaches Bess, asleep on the couch...

RECORDING ORGANIST

Excuse me, Ma'am...

Bess waking, looks at STUDIO CLOCK: 7:37 A.M.

RECORDING ORGANIST (O.S.) (CONT'D)

Miss Jackson ready for the man to
push the button now.

Mahalia approaches Bess...

MAHALIA

Something else.

BESS

What now?...

MAHALIA

You got my up front money, in cash?

Bess half asleep, nods.

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

Then let's make a record!

Mahalia beaming, full of life as RECORDING SIGN flicks **ON!**

41 EXT. APOLLO RECORDS - MORNING (1947)

41

BRIGHT SUNLIGHT bathes Mahalia as she steps out of the building... Mildred follows, Russell lingers near. Mahalia notices a HOMELESS MAN, speaks to him:

MAHALIA

Here Baby, get you some breakfast.

Russell witness Mahalia slip the Homeless Man \$2.

MILDRED

See, we out by 10 A.M. And they say colored folks can't be on time.

Mahalia busts out laughing, notices Russell.

MAHALIA

I hope Mrs. Berman don't fire you.

RUSSELL

Oh, I don't suppose anybody could keep the job of handling you, Miss Jackson.

MAHALIA

I don't even know your name.

RUSSELL

Reverend Russell Roberts.

MILDRED

Reverend?

MAHALIA

I'm too tired for fooling...

RUSSELL

Shiloh Baptist Church, Atlantic City. One of my parishioners records with Apollo. I've heard about you on the revival circuit for years, wanted to hear you sing for myself.

MAHALIA

Oh Lord, you're serious...

A beat -- Mahalia readjusts her thinking about this man.

RUSSELL

So when will your record come out?

MAHALIA

Whenever Mrs. Berman decide. If she decide. It may never come out.

RUSSELL

Your business is tough.

MAHALIA

So is yours, Reverend.

RUSSELL

Russell.

MAHALIA

I truly don't know what will come of this, Russell, other than none of us got any sleep. Nine years ago I cut my first record, only place it hit was the graveyard.

RUSSELL

If you read the liturgy closely, you'll find reference throughout the Bible, that Faith requires...

MAHALIA

Oh, now don't waste your fancy talk on me. I read my Bible but was never able to finish school or nothing so most my thoughts, they unlearned.

Mildred dismayed by Mahalia diminishing herself.

RUSSELL

Then to put it plainly, to *she* who knocks, it will be opened.

(beat)

My calling often brings me to Chicago.

MAHALIA

Well clearly, I ain't hard to find, Reverend. Comeon, Mildred...

As Mahalia walks away, whispers privately to Mildred...

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

If I wasn't saved already, Lord, I would let that man baptize me again... And again...

Off Mahalia, smitten by the Preacher man.

42 INT. RECORD SHOP - CHICAGO - MONTHS LATER (1947) 42

A RECORD spins as we hear a familiar voice through speakers:

MAHALIA (V.O.)
*Move on up a little higher, Lord
 Meet that Lily of the Valley
 Feast with the Rose of Sharon*

STUDS (O.S.)
 Oh, wow! Wow...

At the counter by the turntable, STUDS, mid 30s, engrossed in the music. He wears a sports coat and straight edge bow tie.

STUDS (CONT'D)
 Would ya listen to that...
 Incredible!

The MUSIC STOPS as the STORE OWNER, behind the counter, lifts the needle, hands the record to the Man...

STORE OWNER
 Here you go, Studs, enjoy...
 I can't give these records away.
 Nobody will play it on the radio.

In Studs' hands, the lime green **APOLLO** record label reads:

**MOVE ON UP A LITTLE HIGHER
 MAHALIA JACKSON**

43 INT. MAHALIA'S BEAUTY SALON - DAY (1947) 43

A BIBLE in Mahalia's hands. She's reading under the hair dryer as Mildred sweeps up the floor.

MAHALIA
 (loud over dryer)
 You know the first thing Christ did, he fed the people first. Get a person's stomach full, then you can talk about salvation. Most of these preachers, do too much talking, they up there, blah, blah, blah...

The phone RINGS.

MAHALIA (CONT'D)
 Get the phone! Might be John. Boy ain't called me in over a week.

Mildred answers.

MILDRED
(on phone)
Hello, Mahalia's Beauty Salon...

MAHALIA
Is it John?

MILDRED
(on phone, shaking head)
Hey Estelle, how you doing?...
Wait, wait...

Mildred turns on the RADIO...

MILDRED (CONT'D)
(on phone)
What's that station, again?...

As Mildred tunes in the dial to the song being broadcast...

MAHALIA (V.O.)
*...always howdy howdy
It will be always howdy howdy
And never goodbye...*

MILDRED
(overlapping song)
Mahalia! Mahalia, we're on the
radio... It's us!

Mildred lifts away Mahalia's dryer to listen...

MAHALIA
(shocked)
That's my voice... What gospel
program we on?

MILDRED
No, it's some white man's show.

Off Mahalia, the joy about to sink in...

44 INT. WENR AM RADIO STATION - STUDIO - CONTINUOUS (1947) 44

Studs smoking a cigar, sitting before a microphone.

STUDS
Since I first heard this song the
other day I haven't been able to
stop playing it. It's by a woman on
the South Side with a golden voice.
(MORE)

STUDS (CONT'D)

Her name's Mahalia Jackson, and if she were singing the blues, she'd be another Bessie Smith. What she sings is called gospel. I'm not a religious man but I pray people buy this record.

45 INT. MAHALIA'S BEAUTY SALON - CONTINUOUS (1947) 45
An explosion of joy and pain as Mahalia celebrates all of her prayers being answered -- she **TESTIFIES!**

MAHALIA

Oh, Thank you, Lord!... I'm on my knees... This why you brought me out the water... Thank you... Yes, I am whole... I can feel... MY GOD IS REAL!

46 OMITTED 46
47 OMITTED 47
48 OMITTED 48
49 OMITTED 49
50 OMITTED 50
51 Omitted 51
52 OMITTED 52
53 OMITTED 53
54 OMITTED 54

ACT FOUR

55 INT. WENR AM RADIO STATION - STUDIO - DAY (1950) 55
TITLE: **Chicago, 1950**

Studs sits before scattered papers: news releases, clippings and written notes as **SONG** plays out...

STUDS

(on microphone)

That was Chicago's own Mahalia Jackson. Before this song became a hit, the Holy Grail of Gospel sales was a hundred thousand records. But since the release of "Move On Up A Little Higher" two years ago, it has sold over two million copies. Now tell us something that we don't know about you.

Mahalia sits opposite him. Now in her late 30s, she's an unflappable pro.

MAHALIA

"Mahalia" was the name of my Aunt, she was a girl in the slave days. She dreamed of jubilee, of better days to come. My mother gave me her name.

STUDS

By "jubilee", you mean gospel?

MAHALIA

Jubilee's a burst of freedom. That's what I feel, the bounce when I sing.

STUDS

Well I, for one, cannot wait for you to deliver your glorious jubilee to the cultural elite at Carnegie Hall.

MAHALIA

Oh, I don't believe my type of songs belong there, Mr. Terkel.

STUDS

You can call me "Studs."

MAHALIA

I'm not sure I can! What do you mean? Don't you got a real name?

STUDS

That's what I'm stuck with, and it's as real as it gets. But how real is this news release?

He rummages to find among his papers, hands to Mahalia:

GOSPEL SINGER TO PERFORM AT CARNEGIE HALL

56 EXT. MAHALIA'S BEAUTY SALON - LATER (1950) 56

The grand windows papered by posters and event flyers, a celebration of Mahalia's accomplishments.

MAHALIA (V.O.)

It don't matter what I said to the promoter, it matter what I sign...

57 INT. MAHALIA'S BEAUTY SALON - CONTINUOUS (1950) 57

Mahalia on the phone.

MAHALIA

(on phone)

And I ain't signed no damn contract for Carnegie Hall!...

Mildred looks up with interest. She's seated in the waiting area, notating music sheets on her lap. The salon's jumping with CUSTOMERS, Estelle and a YOUNG BEAUTICIAN working the chairs.

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

(on phone)

Now stop them press releases. I don't wanna hear nothing no more about Carnegie Hall!

Mahalia slams down phone.

ESTELLE

Oh, Halie, I'd love to see you sing at Carnegie Hall!

MAHALIA

Thought you hated traveling.

The YOUNG BEAUTICIAN approaches Mahalia...

YOUNG BEAUTICIAN

Ms. Jackson, excuse me, we're running out of pomade and shampoo and can't find the number for the supplier anywhere.

MAHALIA

Mildred!

Mildred's working on music.

MILDRED

Do you want songs or pomade?
I cannot do both anymore.

Mahalia snatches up the phone and dials...

MAHALIA

(on phone)

Hey Darlene, Mahalia here. I need a favor, we're running low on shampoo and pomade...

YOUNG BEAUTICIAN

(to Mildred)

She just knows the number?

MILDRED

(a warning)

She forgets nothing.

MAHALIA

(on phone)

Well I certainly do appreciate it. Talk with you soon...

Mahalia hangs up.

MILDRED

(looking down at music)

I think we should do that concert.

MAHALIA

Oh hell, I ain't studying Carnegie Hall. Now I gotta run to the grocery. Russell's in town tonight, gonna cook up some gumbo.

MILDRED

Really, again?

MAHALIA

I'm tired of you screwing up your face every time I see the man. It's been three years. You ain't got no vote!

Beat as Mildred considers whether to say...

MILDRED

I just don't think he's for you.

MAHALIA

Why? I ain't good enough for no
educated Preacher man!

MILDRED

No! It's how you act--

MAHALIA

Act?

MILDRED

(careful)

You bend a little too much...

MAHALIA

What you getting at?

MILDRED

I hate when you make yourself
lower.

MAHALIA

Nah, nah, Mildred, you wrong. See
here now--

Mahalia coughs, wheezes... Falls back into a chair.

ESTELLE

(rushing over)

Halie...

MAHALIA

(to Mildred)

I stoop to nobody but God.

(to Beautician)

It's just a spell. I'm fine...

(flares)

Just let me catch my breath!

Everybody in salon staring, not knowing what to do as Mahalia
slowly calms...

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

(to everybody)

Quit your looking. I'm fine.

Mahalia gets up, heads out...

Off Mildred, looking truly concerned for the first time.

58 INT. MAHALIA'S PRAIRIE AVENUE FLAT - KITCHEN - EVENING (1958)

Smoke billows. Burnt shrimp. Pots and pans scattered. Mahalia working fierce to salvage dinner. Russell tiptoes in...

RUSSELL
Can I help?

MAHALIA
Can you cook?

RUSSELL
As well as I sing.
(sings tone deaf)
Amazing Grace...
How sweet the sound...

MAHALIA
Dinner gonna be late.

RUSSELL
This isn't like you.

MAHALIA
How you know what I'm like? You
don't see me every day.

RUSSELL
I've eaten enough of your cooking
to know this burning up the kitchen
means something's wrong.

Mahalia stops working...

MAHALIA
They want me to sing at Carnegie
Hall.

RUSSELL
(thrilled)
Mahalia Jackson stepping into the
"Magic Circle!"

MAHALIA
I don't belong in no Carnegie Hall!
Who the hell do you think I am?

Mahalia rises, wildly mimics a soprano singing, "Victorio!"

RUSSELL
(laughing)
If your singing goes, you could be
the next Moms Mabley.

Mahalia's serious. Beat.

RUSSELL (CONT'D)
Look, Duke Ellington's played
there.

MAHALIA
That's different, he's class.

Beat -- now Russell's serious.

RUSSELL
(touches her shoulder)
Baby...

MAHALIA
I'm scared, Russell. I ain't
trained like no opera singer.
I don't belong on that stage.
I ain't good enough, ain't
sophisticated, I'm not educated...

Terrified, Russell smooths a hand down her arm; with the
other hand, cradles her face...

MAHALIA (CONT'D)
And what the hell's the "Magic
Circle" mean?...

RUSSELL
Mahalia Jackson you are the
smartest, the strongest of Faith
that God ever put on this planet.
All you need, take one seed of what
you give others, plant it in
yourself.

Russell looks at her until they find each other with a kiss.

59 EXT. CARNEGIE HALL - NIGHT (1950)

59

A POSTER MARQUEE advertising a night of gospel performances,
headlined by Mahalia Jackson.

MAHALIA (V.O.)
God, why you put me up in Carnegie
Hall?

60 INT. CARNEGIE HALL - STAR DRESSING ROOM - CONTINUOUS (1950) 60

Mahalia praying before the mirror, wearing a dressing robe.
She's flanked by a florist shop's worth of flowers.

MAHALIA

Please let Mildred be able to play tonight... You know I'm not used to singing with no other piano players anymore. Lord, what am I gonna do?

She lifts her head as if to ask the same of Estelle, sitting on the couch, wearing a breathtaking gown.

ESTELLE

Mildred says she's able to play. You need to trust her. It was only food poisoning but she's okay now.

MAHALIA

Trying to rehearse today without her, I opened my mouth but it was like God took away my gift. I had a voice like a little bird. Mildred knows my arrangements just in her head, without any writing down.

(beat)

If I flop, I like to flop big. Please, just let me, Lord, let me get through.

(to Estelle)

I'm scared tonight will ruin everything I've done.

John enters in a tux.

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

Where's Mildred, you find her?

JOHN

I knocked on her dressing room, door's locked.

MAHALIA

Knock again!

61 INT. CARNEGIE HALL - DRESSING ROOM BATHROOM - CONTINUOUS 61
(1950)

Mildred at the sink, hot water running. Steam fogs the mirror as the sink fills. She turns off the faucet, touches the water - HOT! Bracing herself, Mildred plunges her hands into the water - tremendous burn but soothes her aching hands...

A KNOCK at the outer dressing room door.

MILDRED

Hold yourself, Mahalia... I'm
coming!

She closes her eyes and prays before removing her hands,
drying them gently, carefully with a towel...

On the counter -- a glass, two bottles: COCA COLA & WHISKEY.

As Mildred mixes herself a whiskey drink...

62 OMITTED

62

63 INT. CARNEGIE HALL - STAR DRESSING ROOM - CONTINUOUS (1950) 63

Mahalia in the mirror. A **KNOCK** at the door.

MAHALIA

Get in here, Mildred! Where the
hell--

As Russell enters--

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

Russell!

They embrace. He presents her with a wreath of flowers...

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

What's that? This ain't a funeral.

RUSSELL

Supposed to represent the "Magic
Circle." They say that's what it
feels like when you step out on the
stage of Carnegie Hall. Once you
get inside that circle, nothing can
harm you, you can't get it wrong.

MAHALIA

Oh good, I need all the magic God
can give tonight. Here, I want you
to meet my boy, John...

John approaches...

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

Calls himself "Brother John" now,
singing folk music and the blues at
the Apollo Theatre.

JOHN
 (shaking hands)
 Good to meet you, sir.

Estelle stands...

MAHALIA
 And this my good friend, Estelle.
 She owns my beauty shop.
 (beat)
 Only she don't know she own it yet.

ESTELLE
 Halie...

MAHALIA
 The shop's always been something
 for me to lean on but now, it seems
 like it's leaning on me.

ESTELLE
 I can't accept such a gift.

MAHALIA
 Hell, why's everybody expect me to
 be giving all the time.

ESTELLE
 Well I didn't ask to buy, I can't
 afford--

MAHALIA
 Gimme a dollar. Can you afford
 that?

Beat - Estelle gives a dollar from her purse. Mahalia tucks
 the dollar into her bra.

MAHALIA (CONT'D)
 John, go tell the promoter to bring
 up the rest of my money, in cash.

JOHN
 You doing that even here? It's
 Carnegie Hall, Mama!

MAHALIA
 I gotta take me wherever I go.

Off Russell, smiling, in love.

64

INT. CARNEGIE HALL - LATER (1950)

64

ENTRANCE APPLAUSE from a sold-out crowd. We never see the audience. We only hear them and feel them, like Mahalia.

INSIDE THE MAGIC CIRCLE: Mahalia onstage, wearing a black velvet robe, white edges. Her arms raised, eyes closed.

Mildred at an ebony Steinway piano begins to play the PIANO INTRO to "How I Got Over." Mahalia opens her eyes to sing...

...she's forgotten the words! Looks to Mildred--

MILDRED

(mouthing the words)

How I got over...

How did I make it over...

MAHALIA

(formal, even tempo)

How I got over?

How did I make it over?

*You know my soul looks back in
wonder*

How did I make it over?

Mahalia's fear appears like poise. She's not like herself.

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

Tell me how I got over?

How did I make it over?

*You know my soul looks back and
wonders*

How did I make it over?

Mildred coaxing, loosen up!

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

Soon as I can see Jesus,

The man that died for me

Man that bled and suffered

Hung on Calgary.

Mahalia ignores Mildred's direction...

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

*I wanna thank God for how he
brought me*

*And I wanna thank God for how he
taught me*

...until now, loosens up, regaining trust in her voice...

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

*Oh, thank my God how he kept me
Oh, thank him He never left me*

With the next lyric, Mahalia turns it out!

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

*Then, I wanna thank Him for old
time religion
Oh I'm gonna thank God for giving
me a vision*

Mildred on fire!

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

*Oh, I'm gonna join the Heavenly
choir
And I'm gonna sing and never get
tired*

They go back and forth, talking to each other with the music.

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

*I'm gonna sing somewhere 'round the
alter
Oh, I'm gonna shout all my troubles
over
Lord, I'm gonna thank you
Thank you for being so good to me*

As Mahalia takes Carnegie Hall to church, we HEAR people in the audience **SCREAM, CLAP, WALK THE FLOOR!**

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

*Well, tell me how I made it over
Had a mighty hard time.
You know my soul looks back in
wonder
How did I make it over.
Coming from the north, south, east
and west.
The only way to the land of rest
We're gonna join the heavenly choir
We'd gonna shout, Lord, and never
get tired.
I'm gonna sing somewhere round the
altar,
Oh, I'm gonna shout all my troubles
over.
Lord I wanna thank ya, thank ya for
being so good to me.*

(MORE)

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

*I wanna thank ya, at this moment,
 Oh I wanna thank ya hey, at this
 moment, you said touch, hey, in my
 name, you said touch in my name
 Oh I feel, I feel like running
 Oh I feel I feel like running
 Lord, I feel, I feel like running
 Lord, I feel, I feel like running
 Lord, I thank you, thank you for
 being
 So, good to me.*

Mahalia finishes to a storm of **APPLAUSE** as she glows in a halo of light.

65 INT. CARNEGIE HALL - STAR DRESSING ROOM - LATER (1950) 65

Mahalia enters sweaty, exhausted, met with FLASHBULBS!

MAHALIA

What a day!

As she fights through a sea of praise from the CROWD of press and supporters, she can't get air, begins to panic...

A SUPPORTER

Oh, Sister Jackson! You are truly a living legend in your time. You lead us, truly you lead us, you lead us.

MAHALIA

(nodding)
 Get Mildred...

The supporter runs off. Mahalia gasping, pushing on...

BLACK PROMOTER

Incredible! Broke attendance! Half the audience was white! Can you believe? Carnegie Hall wants you back next year!

MAHALIA

Where's Mildred?...

Mahalia leans against a wall, out of breath.

AGENT

Columbia Records wants to make you an offer! A recording contract and your own radio show, national syndication!

Mahalia can barely breathe as Mildred arrives...

MILDRED
Mahalia, what's wrong?

Mahalia straightens, announces to everybody...

MAHALIA
Ain't nothing wrong!
(to the press)
Well, I worked for the Lord
tonight, truly.

As Mahalia stands proudly, Mildred sees a BLOOD SPOT on the backside of Mahalia's dress...

MILDRED
Alright, thank you everybody but
Miss Jackson needs her rest.

MAHALIA
(to Mildred, seething)
What you doing? I'm alright!

MILDRED
(whisper)
You're bleeding. Get off your feet.

Mildred helps Mahalia to sit as a few leave but most remain.

MILDRED (CONT'D)
(to crowd)
Everybody, please... Please, she
needs... Everybody...
(pushes to the door)
EVERYBODY!... GET THE HELL OUTTA
HERE!... Miss Jackson, she needs
her rest, YOU HEAR ME?

The crowd reluctantly leaves as Mildred pushes the rest, closing the door. They are alone.

MAHALIA
We could've been better, Mildred.
We gotta get better. Be perfect--

Mahalia has severe cramps, falls to her knees. Mildred rushes to comfort...

MILDRED
Mahalia...

MAHALIA
I'm not going to no doctor!

Off Mahalia, terrified.

66 OMITTED 66

67 OMITTED 67

ACT FIVE

68 INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - NEW YORK - EVENING (1950) 68

Mahalia in a hospital bed, praying...

MAHALIA

Oh Lord, I keep praying not to have
anger in my heart but it's so
hard... Why God?...

Reveal Russell in the doorway, witnessing her prayer.

RUSSELL

God's not the only one here for
you. I wish you'd believe
in me too.

MAHALIA

Russell, please...

RUSSELL

You can tell the newspapers
bronchitis but I know this isn't
bronchitis. Tell me what happened.

Russell sits at the foot of her bed, begins to rub her feet.

MAHALIA

I hate doctors.

RUSSELL

That's a strong word, darling.

MAHALIA

I know but see with doctors, we
like experiments to them. They
don't care about a colored woman's
health more than a lab rat that
teach them how to fix up white
folks. But the one doctor here, he
seem alright, he a specialist. He
got in a fight with the other
doctors, took my case over and told
me I have sarcoidosis.

RUSSELL

Hmm? Is it...?

MAHALIA

No, it's not cancer. There were fibroids on my lymph nodes that were removed. But there were tumors too... They took my insides out, Russell.

RUSSELL

They took out... You mean you had a hysterectomy?

MAHALIA

Yes... I feel... Everything that make me feel like a woman is gone. Empty. Broke in a way that can't be fixed.

RUSSELL

I'm so sorry.

MAHALIA

It feels like my spirit's gone. There's this burning ache in my heart. I got all these questions. Why me? Why the one doctor I trust, let this happen? Why can't I carry a child like I've always hoped for? God took away our chance to make a family together.

RUSSELL

We will get through this. All I want is you. Family begins with you, however, whatever that looks like... Just come on, step inside the "Magic Circle" with me...will you?

MAHALIA

You promise nothing will harm us? You promise?... You--

RUSSELL

I do!

(beat...beat)

So when can I carry you across the stoop?

Russell kisses her feet.

MAHALIA

Russell, you the only thing I can
decide on that I don't have to pray
on.

A PIANO rehearses a CORNY POP TUNE, CONTINUES OVER...

69 OMITTED 69

70 OMITTED 70

71 INT. MAHALIA'S PRAIRIE AVENUE FLAT - PRAYER CLOSET - EVENING
(1954)

A well-read Columbia CONTRACT in Mahalia's hands as she prays
in her small prayer closet lit by candles.

MAHALIA

Oh Lord, If I'm not supposed to
have children, do you want me to
reach millions with your gospel?...
I've been praying so hard over this
contract, I feel you either want me
to sign this or convert to being a
lawyer... Are you opening a new
gate like in the Bible: *Behold, I
am doing a new thing, now it
springs forth. Do you not perceive
it, Halie?*... Or do you got me at
that crossroads that's in the
blues, is this really a deal with
the CBS devil?...

PIANO CONTINUES OVER...

72 INT. MAHALIA'S PRAIRIE AVENUE FLAT - LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS
(1954)

Mildred at the piano rehearsing. Studs relaxing on the
floor...no sports coat, no bow tie, no shoes. A scatter of
legal pads with written notes and a tape recorder. John on
the couch, reading a magazine.

STUDS

Is that one of the new songs from
Columbia?

MILDRED

Yep. They confident she gonna sign.

STUDS

I don't know, it sounds different
than her other material, too pop.

JOHN

It's a "sweetened-water" song.

MILDRED

If she sings this, I'll have to
fight to find its salvation.

Mahalia enters from the prayer closet with the contract.

JOHN

(re contract)

That your new Bible?

STUDS

The gospel according to Columbia
Records.

MAHALIA

I'm gonna have them put it in here
that I won't do the radio show
unless you the writer, Studs. CBS
keep telling me you on a blacklist.
Well, hell, I'm on a blacklist too.

STUDS

I'm afraid you're mixing with an
agitator. But you do the show no
matter what. Don't worry about me.

MAHALIA

I ain't. I'm worried about being in
millions of white folks' living
rooms all by myself. I need you.

STUDS

I'll follow you anywhere, long as
you don't try to redeem me.

MAHALIA

If I could ever get you saved, we'd
be alright.

They laugh together.

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

Mildred, we need to give Studs here
some of the redeemer.

STUDS

She's been playing one of your new
"sweetened-water" songs.

MAHALIA

Hey John, don't tell the man all
our secrets. If you want some sweet
water...

Mahalia goes into the kitchen.

STUDS

No thanks, Mahalia. I don't like
that Southern tea, too sweet.

MAHALIA (O.S.)

I ain't getting you tea.

STUDS

(to John)

I take it you don't think she
should sign.

JOHN

Columbia don't know anything about
our music. Mama will lose the
audience that brought her up.
She'll make millions but lose her
voice, they'll wanna add symphonies
and big bands. And probably, first
thing, they'll fire Mildred.

Mahalia returns with a pint of Old Grand-Dad.

MAHALIA

(to John)

Ain't nobody ask what you think
about Columbia records. And ain't
nobody ever gonna fire Mildred.

(offering whiskey...)

Here you go, Studs.

STUDS

Oh, I wouldn't think you drank
whiskey.

MAHALIA

I ain't gonna say if I do or if I
don't but there will always be a
bottle at my home for you, Studs.
Without you, I'd have sold a couple
million less records and Mildred
would still be poor.

Mildred bristles.

MAHALIA (CONT'D)
 (privately, to Studs)
 Don't give her none.

STUDS
 (accepting the gift)
 Thank you, Mahalia.
 (a toast)
 To all of our respective
 redeemers...

He takes a swig and shudders, staggers around the room until his pratfalls earn laughter from Mahalia and John, eventually Mildred.

MAHALIA
 Alright now, let's get serious. If
 we do this, how's it gonna go?

Studs back to his notebooks, all business.

STUDS
 I figure it will go like our other
 interviews, only more in-depth.
 I'll ask you questions about the
 background of the songs, where they
 come from. We'll do an episode on
 your relationship with Thomas
 Dorsey, of course. And one on your
 growing up in New Orleans, another
 about your travels in the South.

Mildred and John laugh.

MAHALIA
 You want me to say how when I go
 into a department store in the
 South, I can't get a sandwich.
 I can't get a bottle of pop, can't
 get a cab. Or if I'm driving a nice
 car, how I gotta play the Mammy
 when the police pull me over or
 they call me a nigger woman and try
 and shake me down for money. What,
 Studs, you want to air the truth,
 don't you?

STUDS
 I do, Mahalia, but...

MAHALIA

I know, Baby. We both blacklisted.
 Only difference, I can't never get
 off that list. Now we gonna give
 them the gospel but we're gonna mix
 it up with a little sugar too...
 A little of that "sweetened-water,"
 right John?

Mildred begins to play INTRO to CORNY POP SONG.

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

Right, there see... What the people
 want is rhythm. That make everybody
 feel good. Now with our studio
 audience, your folks, we'll need to
 teach them how to clap with music.
 They got to be with us for this to
 work. And our folks, we got to let
 them know no jumping up and down,
 no stomping or shouting cause we'll
 be recording.

As Mahalia takes the stage before an imagined audience,
 claiming her decision to sign with Columbia...

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

You got to remember, children... We
 ain't in church... We're on CBS!

Mildred looks to John, acknowledging the path chosen.

73 EXT. MAHALIA'S BEAUTY SALON - NIGHT (1954) 73

Closed for business but lights glow within.

RADIO ANNOUNCER (V.O.)

Good Evening... The Columbia
 Broadcasting System is very proud
 to bring you tonight, the greatest
 gospel singer the world's ever
 known. Live from our studio in
 Chicago...*The Mahalia Jackson Show!*

74 INT. MAHALIA'S BEAUTY SALON - CONTINUOUS (1954) 74

John and Estelle listening to the radio...

MAHALIA (V.O.)
*I sing because I'm happy,
 And I sing because I'm free,
 Oh His eye is on the sparrow,
 And I know He watching over me...*

Their conversation OVERLAPS the broadcast...

ESTELLE
 Imagine, there's millions listening
 tonight. Millions right now, all
 listening to our Halie...

As John scans the walls of Mahalia's career mementos...

JOHN
 Mama's like the loaves and the
 fishes, splitting herself in a
 million pieces, trying to feed
 everybody. But I wonder once this
 miracle's over, what's gonna be
 left of Mahalia Jackson?

Off John, holding a poster of his mother.

75	OMITTED	75
76	OMITTED	76
77	OMITTED	77
78	OMITTED	78

ACT SIX

79	EXT. MAHALIA'S BEAUTY SALON - DAY (1954)	79
----	--	----

The grand windows decorated for Christmas.

MAHALIA (V.O.)
 Ike came by last night.

ESTELLE
 To bring you a Valentine?

MAHALIA
 To see my new house.

Estelle fitting Mahalia with a wig.

ESTELLE

How much you "loan" him this time?

MAHALIA

I know the man will never pay me back but I'm gonna keep giving anyway. God made the marriage, we supposed to be together for a lifetime of something. Ike was never no partner like Russell. We're going to build a Temple together.

ESTELLE

Well I hope you can find the time to marry, as crazy and busy as your life's getting...

(finishes setting wig)

There you go... Wearing wigs is going to save you.

MAHALIA

Oh, Lord knows I need saving. Seem like the people either love me or they hate me. They feel so strong it gets confusing. People sending me all this fan mail but then one letter say, "Please don't be a Beulah... For the sake of our race, talk as intelligent as you sing." Then all these high white people come to my concerts, say I'm wonderful but it's peculiar then how some get mad cause I bought a house in their neighborhood and shoot out my picture window.

ESTELLE

I told you not to move to Chatham Village.

MAHALIA

Ain't a dream home supposed to be wherever you dream? Didn't I earn a nice yard and enough space to put up three Christmas trees?

ESTELLE

Did you get the window fixed?

MAHALIA

Cost me two hundred dollars! Had
the repair man put something else
up too.

Off Mahalia, a smiling warrior of God.

81 OMITTED 81

82 OMITTED 82

83 EXT. MAHALIA'S HOUSE - 8358 S INDIANA - DAY (1954) 83

A BRONZE PLAQUE by the front door that reads:

STUDS (V.O.)

"DEAR LORD, IN THIS HOUSE YOU ARE
WANTED AND YOU ARE WELCOME"

Studs on the porch with Mahalia.

STUDS

Don't you think an armed guard
would be better?

MAHALIA

Got one of them too. Thanks to
Mayor Daley.

A POLICE CRUISER parked outside Mahalia's large two-story red
brick ranch house on a corner in the suburbs.

STUDS

Who's going to get close enough to
see this plaque?

MAHALIA

Oh, the people, they gather
sometimes out here while I'm
rehearsing inside. Reminds me when
I was a child singing with them
Victrola records, people would
gather outside my Aunt's house to
hear me.

STUDS

Mahalia, are you ever gonna sing
some Bessie Smith for me?

MAHALIA

If you my true friend, Studs, you
don't never want me to get to where
I sing the blues.

84 INT. MAHALIA'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER (1954) 84

The furniture gilded, highly ornate. There are three
Christmas trees, fully decorated, and a Baby Grand Piano.
Among the HANGING PHOTOS: Marian Anderson, Paul Robeson...

STUDS

(pointing to photo)
Liberace... You really like him?

MAHALIA

His fingers are like little silver
fish.

STUDS

Well, I love the house, Mahalia.
I'm so happy for you. But three
Christmas trees?

MAHALIA

Oh, that's for the Father, the Son,
the Holy Spirit. Figure why not
give them each their own tree.
Guess which one your gift's under?

Studs cackles as she hands him a present...

STUDS

(sensing something)
What?... They're cancelling us,
aren't they? The Southern
advertisers... Dammit, I knew it!

MAHALIA

Feels every break I get becomes
like a rope around my neck, I'm
tied to a stave like a mule. I can
only pull ahead so far till
something holds me back, trying to
keep me from getting out of place.

Studs distraught over losing the show.

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

Wish I could've helped you feed
your family a little longer, Studs.

STUDS

You still got my pint of whiskey?

85 INT. MAHALIA'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - LATER (1954)

85

A half empty pint of Old Grand-Dad besides Studs as he opens his present - a CAMEL HAIR SPORT COAT...

STUDS

(putting it on)

Oh, Mahalia, I can't take this!

MAHALIA

Oh, yes, you can-- If it fits.

Studs hugs Mahalia, puts it on...

STUDS

Look at me, how can I represent the people looking this fancy?

MAHALIA

Speaking of representing the people, got a call the other night on behalf of a young reverend, a Martin Luther King. Wants me sing at one of his rallies for his bus boycott. His people asked me my fee. You ever hear of him?

Mahalia delights Studs with her spirited playfulness...

STUDS

(laughing)

Of course, Mahalia.

MAHALIA

(imitates a white Southerner)

Don't you think the colored are pushin' too fast?... Why they lookin' for trouble all the time?... That Martin Luther Negro ain't no Moses...

Studs cackling now, as she imitates Moms Mabley...

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

Mmm, child, you laugh at crazy things... 'At's why you get in trouble all the time you'self.

As Studs settles, Mahalia lets out a long sigh...

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

(coyly)

Oh, what do you think I should do?

STUDS

When are you going?

MAHALIA

Day after tomorrow, we're driving
the Cadillac.

STUDS

What did you say was your fee?

MAHALIA

Aw hell, Studs, you should know...
I don't charge the walking people.

STUDS

(serious)

Mahalia, be careful. They play
rough down there.

Off Studs, concerned about his friend.

86	OMITTED	86
87	OMITTED	87
88	OMITTED	88
89	INT. DR. KING'S HOUSE - STUDY - MONTGOMERY - DAY (1956)	89

MARTIN LUTHER KING, mid 30s, behind his desk like he belongs
in a photograph. Mahalia and Mildred seated before him.

MARTIN LUTHER KING

The Bible tells us we are made of
both a natural body and a spiritual
body. And I believe, Sister
Mahalia, that through your voice,
you are able to connect the natural
and the spiritual in a way that
people need today.

MAHALIA

Thank you, Dr. King, but people
need food before they need singing--

MILDRED

Mahalia's always cooking up food
for people...

Something's off about Mildred... Mahalia eyes her.

MARTIN LUTHER KING

Well I hope for the opportunity to
taste Mahalia's cooking one day.

MILDRED

That's right... Get a person's
stomach full, then you can talk
about salvation!

Mahalia embarrassed.

MILDRED (CONT'D)

I apologize, Dr. King. I'm a little
nervous.

MAHALIA

Mildred don't like to come down
South.

MILDRED

Dr. Abernathy told us how they
bombed that church near his house
last week.

MARTIN LUTHER KING

Yes, they assumed it was his church
but they bombed the Methodists
instead.

MILDRED

Oh, Lord...

Off Mildred, nervous...

90

INT. GREEN '54 CADILLAC FLEETWOOD - LATER (1956)

90

...Mildred looking out the window of the moving car. Mahalia
driving. Tension between them.

MAHALIA

I don't know if you been drinking
lately but your playing's
slipping...

Mildred rubbing her hands.

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

I'm starting to feel alone up there singing, like I don't know who you are anymore. I got a lot on my mind too. Russell's been getting a bunch of medical tests. I don't know what's going on with him...

(beat)

Even though I know you don't like the man.

MILDRED

It's not that I don't like the man, it's how you act around him. Saying you're uneducated, unlearned... I hate that you believe that you're inferior to any man.

A beat as Mahalia drives, absorbs this truth about herself.

MILDRED (CONT'D)

That's why I left my husband. Never felt I was good enough for him

MAHALIA

(shocked)

You were married?...

MILDRED

To a preacher. Was still married when I started playing for you.

MAHALIA

Aw hell, Mildred... Why didn't you ever tell me?

MILDRED

Didn't want you to know I had any other concerns in my life, you kept getting rid of piano players for being too unreliable.

MAHALIA

You saying I ended your marriage?

MILDRED

No.

(smiling)

Being a preacher man's wife ended my marriage.

They laugh together as Mahalia makes a turn...

MAHALIA

You know, it's been bothering me...
I could've been better on the radio
show. The show should still be on
the air--

BANG! They SCREAM as the car swerves off the road.

91 INT./EXT. GREEN '54 CADILLAC FLEETWOOD - MOMENTS LATER (1956)

The car pulled off the road, in the weeds. Mahalia on the
ground, examining the rear blown tire.

MILDRED (O.S.)

You sure they ain't shooting? You
sure?!

Mahalia finds the cause -- a board with a nail. She opens the
car door to show Mildred, cowering on the floor.

MAHALIA

Here's the bullet...

MILDRED

Lord, get me out of the South.
I hate being down here.

MAHALIA

You gonna be able to play tonight?
Dr. King's counting on us.

MILDRED

Mahalia, I'll play for you until it
kills me.

MAHALIA

I know you will.

Off Mahalia, as she takes Mildred's hands.

92 OMITTED 92

93 EXT. DR. KING'S HOUSE - PORCH - NIGHT (1956) 93

Martin Luther King smoking as Mahalia enters from inside the
house, carrying two hot slices of sweet potato pie...

MARTIN LUTHER KING
I'm embarrassed you came back after
singing like that tonight and
started cooking.

MAHALIA
Coretta didn't give up her kitchen
easy.

Martin laughs as he tastes...

MARTIN LUTHER KING
Oh, I believe this pie's nearly as
great as your voice!

Mahalia not eating, pensive.

MAHALIA
Dr. King, how do we--

MARTIN LUTHER KING
Please, my Christian name.

MAHALIA
Martin, how do we hold on to our
faith when times are this bad?

MARTIN LUTHER KING
We don't.

MAHALIA
You saying you don't believe!

MARTIN LUTHER KING
Mahalia, faith is something you
can't hold or keep. The things most
important to us are invisible.
Freedom, Hope, Love, Family,
America, God... They're all ideas
based on faith. Living requires
faith whether you accept it or not.
So the big question we all face is
not whether to believe or not but
what to believe. Our beliefs guide
us all.

MAHALIA
So if God is personal, we're each
alone in our faith?

MARTIN LUTHER KING

Well like your sweet potato pie,
it's going to taste different to
each of us but it's something there
for all to share. God made enough
for everybody.

MAHALIA

I always dreamed one day I'd build
a Temple, a place for learning for
people from every kind of religion.
Everybody deserves the chance to
get an education.

MARTIN LUTHER KING

That's a beautiful dream, Mahalia.

MAHALIA

Well the root of my dream, I've
always felt I'm missing something,
my Aunt pulled outta school in 4th
grade to takeover housework.
I never even got to study or really
learn music.

MARTIN LUTHER KING

Well, maybe God doesn't know how to
read music either.

They laugh together, the joy of sharing pie and their faith.

94	OMITTED	94
95	OMITTED	95
96	OMITTED	96

ACT SEVEN

97	STOCK FOOTAGE/PHOTOS - NEWPORT JAZZ FESTIVAL - DAY/NIGHT (1957)	97
	A HUGE CROWD at the Newport Jazz Festival. Shots of the crowds, the performers, the scale of the event.	
98	EXT. STAGE - NEWPORT JAZZ FESTIVAL - LATER THAT NIGHT (1957)	
	HEAVY FOG and RAIN as Mahalia claims the stage in a gown...	

HUGE CHEERING from an outdoor crowd. Like the Carnegie Hall performance, we only hear and feel the audience who won't stop **CHEERING** -- Mahalia cannot begin to sing.

She smiles, overwhelmed until the crowd **QUIETS...**

MAHALIA

(to crowd)

You make me feel like a star.

WILD CHEERING! Mildred is at the piano.

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

It may be midnight, but it's Sunday morning, and we gonna have us some church.

MORE CHEERING finally ebbs... Mildred bursts into the number--

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

*Didn't it rain, children
Talkin' bout, rain Oh my Lord.
Didn't it, didn't it, didn't it
Oh, oh my Lord, didn't it rain.
Didn't it rain, children
Talkin' bout, rain Oh my Lord.
Didn't it, didn't it, didn't it
Oh, oh my Lord, didn't it rain.*

Mildred begins to DISAPPEAR into the fog...

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

*Well, it rained forty days, forty
nights without stopping
Noah was glad when the rain stopped
dropping
Knock at the window, a knock at the
door
Crying, "Brother Noah, can't you
take no more?"*

MAHALIA, FOG and RAIN are all we see... MAHALIA ALONE!

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

*No crying no, no you're full of
sin. God got to keep and you can't
get in.
Just listen that rainin'
Will you listen thatrainin'?
Just listen that rainin'
All day, all night
All night, all day*

Mahalia drenched, holds out her hands...

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

*Just listen, it's raining
Just listen, it's raining
Will you listen, it's raining.
Some moani, some groanin', Some
groaning, some praying,
Well, Ohhhh,
Didn't it rain, children?
Rain all night long?
Didn't it, didn't it, didn't it? Oh
Oh, my Lord, didn't it rain?*

As her singing crescendos -- **THE RAIN STOPS...**

...SILENCE...

Mahalia looks to the heavens--

The **CROWD EXPLODES!**

99 INT. MAHALIA'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - DAYS LATER (1957) 99

Mahalia sits with Mildred while John reads from newspaper reviews:

JOHN

"A momentary salvation-- a radiance of spirit soared high to the heavens and expanded through every soul in the Newport Jazz Festival crowd. To many, Mahalia Jackson's appearance eclipsed all other performances that night. Hers was the set that made everyone stop and catch their breath."

MAHALIA

That's just too much.

JOHN

And this... "Miss Jackson's bursts of power and sudden rhythmic drives build to a pitch that leaves you unprepared to listen afterwards to any but the greatest of musicians."

He grabs another.

JOHN (CONT'D)

"Mahalia Jackson has a rapturous quality unparalleled on records. With her voice, the accompaniment hardly counts so long as it keeps its place."

MILDRED

"The accompaniment hardly counts?"

JOHN

Wait, read here...

John hands Mildred another review.

MILDRED

(reading, beaming)

"Mildred Falls...the supreme gospel pianist." How do you like that, Miss Jackson?

MAHALIA

You still got me to please.

As John and Mahalia fallout with laughter, the PHONE RINGS.

MILDRED

(answering)

Hello, Mahalia's Big Wig Salon...

JOHN

(laughing)

Awww!

MAHALIA

Alright, you think that's funny... You don't stop singing in them clubs, I'm gonna stop putting you on my programs.

JOHN

When's the last time I been in your program?

MAHALIA

(ignoring, steamrolling)

And Mildred need to stop her poor taste. She a reflection of me. Wearing them cotton dresses on television, look like she poor...

JOHN
 (serious)
 Alright, you going too far,
 Mahalia.

MAHALIA
Mahalia? Boy, I'm your Mama!

Mildred on the phone looks struck by bad news -- Mahalia notices...

Mildred holds out the phone to Mahalia...

100 OMITTED 100

101 INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - NEW JERSEY - DAY (1957) 101

Russell in bed, gaunt, hooked to machines. Mahalia at his side, fighting back tears.

MAHALIA
 Did you know?

RUSSELL
 (smiling)
 I thought it was bronchitis.

MAHALIA
 How could you keep this from me!
 How long did you...

RUSSELL
 (overlapping)
 Mahalia...I'm joking.
 (beat)
 Soon as I found out, I had them
 call you.

MAHALIA
 When you start treatment?

Russell can't speak the truth...

MAHALIA (CONT'D)
 No, baby, no...

RUSSELL
 They say at this stage, the chemo
 would kill me faster.

MAHALIA

My Aunt Duke, she used herbs,
powders, liquids... There's other
things we can try. I've seen
miracles happen.

RUSSELL

I have too... Like the first time
we met, up all night in that
recording studio. All the people
you reached with that song... But
more than your voice, I love your
spirit. How you know about life in
ways most can't see.

MAHALIA

I'm scared I'll lose that. You
helped me more than God when I was
in the hospital. I ain't never
relied like that on nobody before.

RUSSELL

You got to be careful, you're not
alone...

Russell's face clenches in pain...

MAHALIA

Baby...Is there anything I can
do?...

Russell relaxes enough to raise his feet and smile...

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

Well you know...

As Mahalia lovingly rubs Russell's feet...

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

I could be the one, carry you
across the stoop.

RUSSELL

(quietly)

I know you could...

MAHALIA

My prayers, they feel more like
wishes now... Oh, how I pray we
could've made a family. We could've
taken care of so many children
together...

As Mahalia kisses his feet...

102 STOCK FOOTAGE - BIRMINGHAM "CHILDREN'S CRUSADE" - DAY (1957) 102

As BLACK CHILDREN protesting segregation are clubbed by POLICE, attacked by DOGS, knocked down with WATER HOSES...

MAHALIA (V.O.)
(acapella)
*I've been buked and I've been
scorned
And I've been buked and I've been
scorned*

103 EXT. RUSSELL'S FUNERAL - DAYS LATER (1957) 103

A photo of Russell in Mahalia's arms...

MAHALIA (V.O.)
*I've been 'buked and I've been
scorned
I've been talked about, sure your
born.*

As MOURNERS witness the CASKET lower...

104 EXT. LINCOLN MEMORIAL - WASHINGTON D.C. - DAY (1963) 104

Mahalia singing at the podium, wearing a new hat with flowers, DIGNITARIES behind.

MAHALIA
*I've been buked and I've been
scorned
And I've been buked and I've been
scorned
I've been 'buked and I've been
scorned
I've been talked about, sure your
born.*

HUGE APPLAUSE. As Mahalia leaves the podium, Martin approaches... She squeezes his hand and whispers to him...

MAHALIA (CONT'D)
Tell them about your dream, Martin.

SPEECH in hand, Martin approaches the podium, eyes on the words written but before he can speak--

MAHALIA (CONT'D)
Tell 'em about the dream!

Martin looks over at Mahalia in her seat...

MAHALIA (CONT'D)
 (cupping hands to mouth)
 Tell 'em about the dream, Martin!
 Go on! Tell 'em!

There are some CHUCKLES. Martin looks at her with sheepish love then puts away his prepared speech...

Mahalia watches him with pride and tears...

105 INT. MAHALIA'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - LATE NIGHT (1963) 105

The PHOTOGRAPH OF RUSSELL from the funeral atop the piano as Mildred rehearses, exhausted... Her hands ache at the keys, music sheets at her feet. Mahalia in a rage--

MAHALIA
 Come on now, Mildred, you off again!
 What's wrong with you? What you
 doing to my voice!

MILDRED
 I got to go home, I'm tired.

MAHALIA
 I'm tired too but we got to
 rehearse.

MILDRED
 I know you pushing hard, this your
 way of mourning. I'm so sorry about
 Russell, I truly am. But I cannot
 work anymore tonight.

MAHALIA
 We don't get this right, I ain't
 gonna keep putting you on
 television in them cheap ass cotton
 dresses! I hate the way you letting
 yourself go...

As Mildred gathers her purse and music...

MILDRED
 Night, Mahalia.

MAHALIA
 This about wanting that extra
 hundred dollars a week, ain't it?
 That's why you quit working hard.
 Ain't my fault you can't get your
 money straight. It's a sickness
 with you. You're drinking too.

MILDRED

Yeah, I'm drinking. I ain't perfect either. But I can't get my money straight cause you too much in charge... Why do all my checks go to you?

MAHALIA

What you saying?

MILDRED

How come everybody pay you my money then you pay me? Why ain't I paid directly?

MAHALIA

Cause I hire you. You're my piano player. I ain't your singer!

MILDRED

You been paying me the same money the past five years while your fees keep growing bigger, bigger than your wigs!

MAHALIA

Get your hands out my pocket, Girl! You slipping... I don't even recognize you anymore.

MILDRED

That's cause you ain't looking at me, always thinking of yourself first.

MAHALIA

What you mean, all the people I feed, the scholarships I raise. What would you be without me?

MILDRED

The real reason I'm never good enough, the reason nobody's ever good enough is cause you don't feel good enough yourself.

MAHALIA

Get your shit, gather up...
(starts coughing...)
Don't come back. I can get anybody in the world to play piano for me. I'm Mahalia Jackson, ya hear!

MILDRED

You want perfect but you don't give perfect. Ain't nobody perfect. God accepts our imperfections, why can't you, Mahalia Jackson!

Mildred slams the door as she leaves. Mahalia cleans up then looks out the door. Back to cleaning, then to the door... Finally, shouts out the window--

MAHALIA

Mildred!...
(coughing...)
Mildred, get back here!!!...

Mahalia continues yelling out through her coughing fit...

EXT. MAHALIA'S HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

Mildred outside the front door, ready to return...

MAHALIA (O.S.)

Dammit, we got work to do... I can play for my own damn self!

Mildred's hand pulls back from the front door handle.

INT. MAHALIA'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Mahalia goes to the piano and looks at the photograph of Russell...

MAHALIA

(angry)
God, do you even care?...

Mahalia begins to sing for herself the blues she sang as a child, now sung with adult despair...

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

*Hello heartbreak,
I'm saying this for the last time,
Won't let you take me down this
road again.*

106

EXT. MAHALIA'S HOUSE - CONTINUOUS (1963)

106

Mildred slumped on the front stoop, underneath Mahalia's "Welcome" Plaque -- her face wet with tears as she listens...

MAHALIA (O.S.)
*Hello heartbreak,
 Why have you left me feeling this
 way?
 Dazed and confused, now all I can
 do sing the blues...*

ACT EIGHT

107 EXT. MAHALIA'S HOUSE - BACKYARD - SERIES OF SHOTS - DAY 107
 (1964)

A WEDDING. Mahalia beaming, stands with her new husband, MINTERS GALLOWAY, mid 50s, who bears an extraordinary resemblance to Russell. The couple faces PRESS, RADIO and TELEVISION REPORTERS. PHOTOGRAPHERS crowd them as FLASHGUNS go off.

108 PHOTO FLASHES TURN INTO A SERIES OF PHOTOS IN A MAGAZINE 108
 (1964)

REPORTER (V.O.)
 Wedding of gospel singer Mahalia Jackson to salesman-musician Sigmund Galloway, came as a complete surprise. She has sung before queens and presidents, stunned musicologists, overflowed such world-renowned music halls as the State Opera in Vienna and Albert Hall in London. And five times faced a standing-room only audience at Carnegie Hall.

109 INT. MAHALIA'S HOUSE - MORNING (1964) 109

CLOSE ON EBONY MAGAZINE lying on a breakfast tray. A PICTURE of a SMILING MAHALIA and GALLOWAY on the cover. REVEAL: Galloway carrying a tray with breakfast, **WALKING THROUGH THE HOUSE...**

REPORTER (V.O.)
 She has six gold records to her credit, has had her own network radio and television shows, and has been presented the keys to every major city in the United States.
 (MORE)

REPORTER (V.O.) (CONT'D)
 Blessed with fame, wealth, and personal charm, she seemed to have 'The Whole World In Her Hand.' But what the world did not know is that for 21 years Mahalia Jackson had longed for one thing that had escaped her: the lasting love of a good man. This July 2nd the lonely divorcee married the handsome widower, Minters Sigmund Galloway.

INT. MAHALIA'S HOUSE - MAHALIA'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

As Galloway enters, carrying the tray with a plate of eggs and biscuits and tea. Even a vase with flowers.

GALLOWAY
 Rise and shine, my angel cakes. I hope you like your eggs sunny side up. Sunny just like you, baby.

Mahalia smiles, amused. He sets the tray in front of her as she props herself up. He kisses her.

GALLOWAY (CONT'D)
 How is my wife feeling today?

MAHALIA
 Married.

GALLOWAY
 That's good. That's a start. I'll ask again after breakfast.

He walks out and Mahalia smiles after him.

SERIES OF SHOTS UNDERNEATH MUSIC:

--BACKYARD: Mahalia and Galloway sit in a garden swing, talking and laughing, romantic.

--BATHROOM: Galloway gives Mahalia a bubble bath, luxuriously rubbing and massaging her.

--LIVING ROOM: Galloway plays jazz licks on his saxophone, talking animatedly about music. Mahalia's eyes sparkle, listening.

110 INT. MAHALIA'S HOUSE - DINING ROOM - NEW YEAR'S EVE - NIGHT 10
(1964)

Featured among the GUESTS, Martin Luther King. There's a punch bowl on the table. Mahalia sits with Galloway who leans in to speak to her privately...

GALLOWAY

It's New Year's Eve. Can't we serve more than punch?

MAHALIA

I'm gonna punch you if you say a word.

Galloway stands.

GALLOWAY

(to Guests)

I'm kinda parched. Would anybody else like some libations?

Martin Luther King looks at Mahalia, concerned.

111 INT. LIVING ROOM - LATER THAT NIGHT (1964)

111

Galloway reading *JET* magazine. Mahalia enters.

GALLOWAY

Did you kiss Martin goodbye?

MAHALIA

I'm gonna kiss you goodbye next time you embarrass me like that. What did you need to go get that beer for?

GALLOWAY

Well, I can drink in my own house.

MAHALIA

Your house?

GALLOWAY

Woman, is it not my house?

MAHALIA

Of course, it is. But ministers should be offered only coffee.

GALLOWAY

Come on, baby. This is Chicago. Not some backwoods town. Most of those ministers drink and you know it.

MAHALIA

It's just not respectful.

GALLOWAY

So, if I'm gonna drink in my house, then I'm gonna need to offer it. Otherwise what sort of manners would that be?

Mahalia walks out. A beat later, THERE IS A LOUD CRASH. Galloway jumps up.

112 INT. DINING ROOM - CONTINUOUS (1964) 112

Mahalia lies collapsed on the ground, turning blue.

GALLOWAY

Mahalia, stop messing around. Come on. Get up. Mahalia? Mahalia!

113 INT. HOSPITAL - PATIENT ROOM - LATER (1964) 113

Mahalia lies, hooked to monitors. A DOCTOR at her side, Galloway too.

GALLOWAY

What brought about this heart strain, Doctor?

DOCTOR

It's not heart strain. It's her condition. She's not getting oxygen. That strains her heart. She's extremely sick. She will need to be under observation a while.

GALLOWAY

She's got concert dates, money to make.

DOCTOR

That's not going to happen right now. Miss Jackson needs rest.

GALLOWAY

That's Mrs. Galloway actually.

The Doctor looks at Mahalia with concern.

114 EXT. MAHALIA'S HOUSE - DAY (1964) 114

Martin Luther King beside Mahalia's "Welcome" Plaque as he knocks at the front door. Galloway opens.

GALLOWAY

Hey Martin, how you doing?

Beat - Martin Luther King does not like this man.

MARTIN LUTHER KING

I'm in town for the day,
Mr. Galloway. Thought I'd stop by,
visit with Mahalia.

GALLOWAY

She's not feeling well.

MARTIN LUTHER KING

That's why I've come.

GALLOWAY

She needs her rest, Reverend King.

Martin Luther King looks at Galloway, with authority.

MARTIN LUTHER KING

Son, open the door. I'm going to
see Mahalia now.

Galloway steps back, reluctantly.

115 INT. MAHALIA'S BEDROOM - MOMENTS LATER (1964) 115

Martin sits with Mahalia, holding her hand.

MARTIN LUTHER KING

It's easier when we have the devil
to point to. Like the devil Bull
O'Connor with his police and their
dogs... But now the work's getting
harder. The hate against us is
still there but it's more hidden.
It's not the devil outside but the
devil within I fear. That's where I
struggle.

MAHALIA

It's where I struggle too, Martin. Except for your visits, I feel so alone. It don't feel like God's really listening anymore. My boy John won't speak to me, says I've gotten too high. Then Minters say I've gotten too low, too selfish. He wants my Temple money to build a hotel. I don't know what to do.

MARTIN LUTHER KING

Mahalia, that man gives you so little for all the big taking he does. He may look like Russell but he ain't nothing like Russell.

MAHALIA

He do look like him, don't he?... People been saying that but you saying that makes it feel true. Oh Lord, what have I done? I was so busy spreading the gospel it's like I stopped living it. I should've married Russell, had a couple good years together.

MARTIN LUTHER KING

But you did. You had the love you were supposed to. But now, you gotta ask if you've strayed.

MAHALIA

I pray every day. I've never stopped praying.

MARTIN LUTHER KING

But Mahalia, are you listening? Can you still hear what he say?

MAHALIA

I don't know but the first time God spoke, when I come out the water... Oh, the joy in my faith has never been greater.

MARTIN LUTHER KING

It's that feeling that you know...

MAHALIA

That you know that you know!

MARTIN LUTHER KING

That you know, one hundred percent
in your body! Mahalia, I don't tell
people this but I was once driving
home to Atlanta when God spoke and
I found myself for two hours
floating up above the road,
hovering up in the air over
everything.

MAHALIA

Could you feel his voice inside,
pushing out hard, like you a
burning bush?

MARTIN LUTHER KING

You know, you understand...

MAHALIA

One night in Mississippi, God
healed a man through my music, he
jumped right up out of his
wheelchair. It happened.

MARTIN LUTHER KING

I believe you. God's always talking
to all of us but it's so hard to
listen.

Martin smiles but something's wrong. She takes his hands...

MAHALIA

How are you doing, baby?

Martin looks at her hand in his.

MARTIN LUTHER KING

I've missed you. When I come beside
you, I don't feel the dread I feel
every other day of my life.

MAHALIA

What's troubling you? You ain't
called me to sing for you in a long
time.

MARTIN LUTHER KING

I get this feeling, God wants
something from me, and I don't know
if I have the strength to give it.
I just want to go home. But I don't
know where that is anymore.

(beat)

(MORE)

MARTIN LUTHER KING (CONT'D)

If I go before you, will you sing
our song at the funeral?

MAHALIA

Don't you dare leave me here by
myself.

MARTIN LUTHER KING

You'll never be alone when you use
your gift right. Can you sing our
song for me now?

MAHALIA

Only if do it with me...

MAHALIA / MARTIN LUTHER KING

*Precious Lord, take my hand Lead me
on, let me stand
I'm tired, I'm weak, I'm lone
Through the storm, through the
night
Lead me on to the light
Take my hand precious Lord
Lead me home...*

MAHALIA'S VOICE ALONE OVER:

A SERIES OF IMAGES:

-- LIVING ROOM: Mahalia and Galloway arguing.

-- BACKYARD: Galloway talking with hanger-on WOMEN at Mahalia's house as she stands with the MINISTERS, watching him, upset.

-- DINING ROOM: Galloway drinking and throwing a glass, shattering it.

-- FOYER: Galloway with packed suitcases, Mahalia holding open the front door as he leaves the house.

DREAMLIKE: The television in the living room. ON THE SCREEN: NEWSCAST IMAGES OF MARTIN LUTHER KING SHOT IN MEMPHIS. THE IMAGES are slowed, surreal.

MAHALIA (V.O.)

*When my way grows drear
Precious Lord linger near*

In SLOW MOTION Mahalia comes into view, rising from the sofa, face in agony...

MAHALIA (V.O.)

When my life is almost gone

MUSIC CONTINUES OVER:

116 STOCK FOOTAGE - MARTIN LUTHER KING FUNERAL - DAY (1968) 116

Mahalia singing before the assembled CONGREGATION. The casket of Martin Luther King before them, as people pass by the coffin, weeping, mourning, bowing their heads in prayer.

MAHALIA

*Hear my cry hear the call
Hold my hand lest I fall
Take my hand Precious Lord
Lead me home.*

MUSIC CONTINUES OVER:

117 INT. MAHALIA'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - EVENING (1968) 117

Mahalia adding a HANGING PHOTO of Martin Luther King to her wall of heroes...

...beside her, holding her is John -- a reconciliation through tremendous shared grief.

ACT NINE

118 INT. MAHALIA'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - DAY (1971) 118

On the coffee table, THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE: "Mahalia Jackson Returns Tonight!"

STUDS (O.S.)

I hear you have James Baldwin,
Dinah Shore, Jesse Jackson...

As Mahalia bites into a fat dill pickle stuffed with a thick peppermint stick, the vinegar runs down her chin...

STUDS (O.S.) (CONT'D)

Everybody's turning up for your
comeback celebration tonight!

MAHALIA

Well I ain't been nowhere really
but sick and broke and got divorced
again...

Studs laughing, wearing the camel hair sports coat Mahalia gave him. As he eats a peppermint pickle too...

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

I see in the newspaper this morning, they interviewing you now instead of the other way around.

STUDS

Everybody thinks I discovered you. And to tell the truth, for some stupid moments I believed it too.

MAHALIA

You saying you FINALLY believe, you understand, only God discovered me?

STUDS

(laughing)

No, I mean the people of the South Side. Especially the ones in that little storefront church where you started out. They're the real people who discovered you. My baptism came later.

MAHALIA

Don't put that on me now. You supposed to put your faith in God, don't worship false idols.

STUDS

You're the truest person I know. That's what's converted me

MAHALIA

Oh Studs, you know I ain't perfect. You seen I got demons.

STUDS

Yes, Mahalia, we all do. But you never quit fighting yours, never quit trying to live up to your beliefs. I hear the joy in your voice but also the struggle. We aren't any of us perfect but when you sing... Oh Lord, it feels like we could be!

Mahalia reaches out to squeeze the hand of her old friend.

119

EXT. MAHALIA'S BEAUTY SALON - LATER (1971)

119

The grand windows feature posters and flyers from around the world, a celebration of Mahalia's international fame.

MAHALIA (V.O.)

I don't know, Estelle. My hair's been in them damn wigs so long, the people might not recognize me...

120 INT. MAHALIA'S BEAUTY SALON - CONTINUOUS (1971)

120

Mahalia squirming as Estelle runs a hot comb through her hair.

ESTELLE

Hold still... I know what I'm doing. Been doing this longer than you ever did.

MAHALIA

I wonder sometimes, had I kept running the beauty salon, not let everything get so big...

Estelle starts laughing.

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

What's so funny?

ESTELLE

Halie, nothing about you has ever been small, even when you didn't have a stitch to your name. You've been on a mission since I met you.

MAHALIA

You remember, you sent me to that music lesson?

ESTELLE

(smiling)

Oh, you got so mad, called me a "Society Negro"...say how you were never gonna learn how to sing to please white people.

MAHALIA

(serious)

You think I'm a hypocrite?

ESTELLE

Not at all. All them white folks came to you. They the ones that changed, not you. That's what I wish you could see.

MAHALIA

But my mission, I'm scared
something's gone.

ESTELLE

You've lost a lot of people in your
life.

MAHALIA

I'm thankful you still here.

ESTELLE

Well that's cause I quit playing
for you. Lord help anybody get
involved between your singing and
God.

MAHALIA

What's that supposed to mean?

ESTELLE

At your best, God wasn't the only
one up on that stage with you. You
ever think about reaching out to
Mildred?

Mahalia turns away, looks at a FRAMED POSTER we've seen
before -- advertising her first show at Carnegie Hall...

MAHALIA

I hear she ain't doing too well...

ESTELLE

ESTELLE (CONT'D)

Well unless you blind, hearing is
not the same as seeing.

BELL TINGLES as Mahalia's first husband, IKE, enters the
salon. Now in his late 60s, Ike holds a RED LETTER ENVELOPE
like a sword -- still a threadbare knight.

IKE

Hey, Mahalia, Hallelujah!... Your
comeback brought me luck.

ESTELLE

Oh, Lord...

IKE

I took the purse at Hawthorne in
the 2nd, talk about a Beauty!

ESTELLE

You're like a bad penny, Ike.

IKE

How you doing, Estelle... How do you keep looking so young?

ESTELLE

I pay all my debts.

IKE

Well then, here...

Ike brandishes the RED CARD to Mahalia...

MAHALIA

You old fool, it ain't Valentines!

IKE

Well I figure there's no telling if we both still be here by next Valentine's Day.

Mahalia opens the card -- discovers \$500 CASH.

MAHALIA

Ike... You ain't never paid back before... You trying to make a comeback too?

IKE

Nah. We too late for that. I guess I'm still trying to prove the best kind of man I can be. The best of my life was spent with you. I remember every minute we were together.

Mahalia looks at Ike...then Estelle...then surveys the walls of the salon that feature her career mementos...

IMAGES that remind us of events throughout the film:

-- A FLYER from the Mississippi Tent Revival

-- The ALBUM COVER of *Move On Up A Little Higher*

-- A PHOTO of Newport Jazz Festival, Mahalia appears to be alone on stage, enveloped by fog...

We hear the sound of **KNOCKING ON A DOOR...**

121 INT. MILDRED'S APARTMENT - THAT NIGHT (1971)

121

As Mildred makes her way through her shabby apartment to answer the door, we see that arthritis has spread throughout her body. She opens the door to reveal--

Mahalia in a DAZZLING WHITE DRESS and her own hair.

Mildred surprised, puzzled, a little affectionate...

MILDRED

I like your hair.

MAHALIA

Figure it about time to quit the wigs.

MILDRED

Come on in... but don't you have somewhere you need to be tonight?

They walk into Mildred's apartment. Mahalia looks at Mildred.

MAHALIA

How am I gonna make a comeback when half of my best voice is you?

(beat)

This time I'll get the money right too.

Mildred looks to her bent hands...

As Mahalia realizes the severity of Mildred's arthritis...

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

Oh Mildred, I heard you were having hard times but...

Mahalia takes Mildred's hands, begins to massage them.

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

How many years did you suffer?... This is why you were drinking.

MILDRED

I never told you. That's my fault. I'm sorry you didn't know. It's good to see you Halie. I wish you well tonight.

Mahalia doesn't want to go...

MAHALIA

Why don't you come with me? I'd love to bring you up during the show. You don't have to play.

MILDRED

I ain't stepping on no stage I ain't playing on.

MAHALIA

Then come on, play tonight. One song.

MILDRED

Not in front of all them people. I'm not good enough anymore. Besides, I don't believe I ever played perfect for you.

MAHALIA

I never sang perfect either. But the closest I got was with you.

Mildred stunned...

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

Well I do wish God would give us one last song together.

MILDRED

(rubbing her hands)

Maybe come by my church, I still play there sometimes. But not tonight, with all the attention.

Mahalia smiles as an idea arrives...

MAHALIA

Mildred, I'll take care of you. I got the perfect place.

Off Mildred, as she looks at her hands.

122 EXT. THE NEW HOLY GHOST SPIRITUAL TEMPLE - LATER (1971) 122

A South Side storefront on a street turned derelict. Tall display windows, the bottom halves newspapered over from the inside. In PLASTIC LIT LETTERS, the name of the church. Underneath, spray painted in red: "PEACE IS NEVER FAR."

We hear MURMURS, WHISPERS and VOCAL recognitions:

CONGREGATION#1 (V.O.)
Ain't that Mahalia Jackson?...

CONGREGATION#2 (V.O.)
Oh Lord, told my mother she need to
be here tonight...

CONGREGATION#3 (V.O.)
Look here, Mahalia's come Home!

123 INT. THE NEW HOLY GHOST SPIRITUAL TEMPLE - CONTINUOUS (1972)3

Mahalia addressing the SPARSE CONGREGATION who watch from folding chairs as she helps Mildred to the piano on the tiny stage that we remember from when they first met.

MAHALIA
You know the first time I sang at Carnegie Hall, I was so scared I forgot the words to the opening number. I had to look to Mildred for help, she was my mouthpiece for twenty some years.

As Mildred settles on the piano bench...

MAHALIA (CONT'D)
So what are the words tonight, Mildred?

MILDRED
(shy to speak on stage)
Of what?

MAHALIA
The song I should sing.

Mildred's look says, *You really wanna to know?*

MAHALIA (CONT'D)
Go on, what do you think we should play?...

Mildred painfully plays a couple notes of a song that Mahalia recognizes immediately--

MAHALIA (CONT'D)
Oh, Mildred trying to tell me something... This a song we ALL need to remember these words...

Mahalia nods at Mildred to play--

Mildred's HANDS over the piano...

LONG BEAT -- Mildred starts a few notes but her hands are in too much pain... As Mildred continues to try to play, Mahalia half-shuts her eyes, her face aglow as she prays...

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

Dear Lord, I always thought you demanded perfection to deserve your love. I didn't understand...you don't need nothing from any of us but to love each other, help each other. Your gift wasn't my voice, your gift was my purpose. A purpose I couldn't find alone. Thank you for Mildred Falls, for all them years, being the other side of me.

Mildred rips into the PIANO INTRO -- MAHALIA JOYOUS!

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

And thank you, God, thank you for this music! It's like you let me come out the water again...
HALLELUJAH!

(to congregation)

I found my purpose and it's been singing God's words like he right here next to me. Mildred helped me, she's known longer than me, her purpose was to bang those keys in a way that ain't never been heard. And that means you all got a purpose too. God's gift is for everybody. But there ain't no shortcuts...

(sings)

*I'm gonna live the life I sing
about in my song
I'm gonna stand for right
Always showing the wrong
If I'm in the crowd, if I'm alone,
on the streets, or in my home
I'm gonna live the life I sing
about in my song*

Mahalia and Mildred look at one another -- celebrating the gift of their final performance together...

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

*Hmmm, I'm gonna live the life I
sing about in my song
I'm gonna stand for right,
Always showing the wrong*

(MORE)

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

*If I'm in a crowd, if I'm alone,
On the streets, or my home
I'm gonna live the life I sing
about in my song. Mmmmm, oh hmmm.
Oh Lord, ohhh
If I'm in a crowd, if I'm all
alone,
On the street, or in my home
I'm gonna live the life I sing
about in my song.*

As her spirit soars to the heavens, Mahalia looks **OUTSIDE...**

...as it begins to **RAIN...**

FADE TO BLACK

END OF FILM