Thomas Dorsey was a gospel legend.

The man who would become closely associated with the rise of gospel music was the self-described "son of a preacher man" whose musical talents were so widely recognized that gospel tunes were called "Dorseys," began his career on the seedy side of the street (literally, in the prostitute-laden dives on Decatur Street near Auburn Avenue). After moving from a farm near Villa Rica to Harris Street in Atlanta, young Thomas then moved to Forsyth, Georgia, where his father, also named Thomas, pastored a church while working as a sharecropper. Dorsey was proud of the fact that in spite of being stuck in the sharecropper system his father earned a college degree from Atlanta Baptist College (now Morehouse University). With two more children, Thomas and Etta Dorsey returned to Atlanta (Delta Place in Inman Park) in 1908. By 1912 Dorsey had learned to play the piano and that he could make money playing at bars near his home. It was here that he met Gertrude "Ma" Rainey and "Tampa Red" Whitaker, with whom he would team on a number of occasions early in his career. Whitaker and Dorsey played an unusual blend of blues, integrating many influences including country, jazz and what would become known as gospel or gospel blues.

In 1916 Dorsey moved from Atlanta to Chicago where he became noted for his double-meaning songs that were popular in bars and stag parties at which he was frequently called to play. It was here that he became known as "Georgia Tom" and began an extended collaboration with Whitaker, including the hit "It's Tight Like That."

In 1929 he began his long association with gospel music, incorporating elements from his blues background and African-American spirituals with Christian hymns. The blend was an instant success whose appeal crossed racial lines even in the segregated South. In 1930 two Dorseys were played during the National Baptist Convention and the music's popularity seemed to be assured from this point on.

His most famous song is "Precious Lord, Take My Hand," a nation-wide hit in both black and white circles (recorded by Elvis Presley, it sold over a million records). Unfortunately, the song was inspired by the death of his wife during childbirth and his infant daughter the next day. The following year Dorsey formed National Convention of Gospel Choirs and Choruses, which he lead for 40 years. Although he continued to write songs throughout his life, Dorsey did not record after 1934.

During most of his adult life Dorsey was associated with Pilgrim Baptist Church in Chicago, where he was minister of music. The church was the site of the Gospel Singers Convention, which Dorsey organized.

In 1968 interest in Dorsey was rekindled when his friend and touring partner Mahalia Jackson sang "Precious Lord, Take My Hand" at the funeral of Martin Luther King. A 1980 film, Say Amen, Somebody, told the story of the rise of gospel music, correcting crediting the son of a Georgia sharecropper with heavily influencing its development into a mainstream musical form.

"Peace in the Valley" is perhaps his most widely recognized work.