

CLARA WARD



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THE VERY GREATEST

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In 1935, a young African American woman, Gertrude Ward along with her two daughters Willa and Clara, launched a gospel singing career that would take them from the black country churches of South Carolina to the great stadiums, clubs, cruise ships, and concert halls of the world.

Born April 19, 1901 in Anderson, South Carolina, Gertrude "Mother" Ward and her singers helped shape and influence the careers of such luminaries as Mahalia Jackson, Marion Williams, and Aretha Franklin. Biographer Toni Rose, author of the book *Hedges and highways: the story of the world famous Ward Singers*, (as dictated by Willa Ward Royster) states that the spiritual beginning of the group starts back in 1931 when Gertrude, standing before a washtub, heard the master's divine calling to go out and sing the message of the scriptures.

Having moved to North Philadelphia in 1932, Gertrude and her family became members of the Mutchmore Memorial Baptist Church where Gertrude helped organize the Eureka Glee Chorus, an aggregation that exists to this day. The Gertrude Ward Singers were permanently launched in 1934 at the presentation of the group's first anniversary program. Featured guest artists included The Sallie Martin Singers, the late professor Thomas A. Dorsey, and Ruth Jones (who would later become widely acclaimed as Dinah Washington.)

The trio's first major touring appearance took place in Buffalo, New York. In 1947, the trio became a quintet with the taking aboard of Henrietta Waddy and the great Marion Williams. In late 1948, The Wards signed with Herman

Lubinsky's Savoy label out of New York. Sales of their first recordings seemed promising and a number of sides were leased to John Dolphin of Hollywood Records who issued a handful of seventy-eight releases in 1949.

Having lengthened their name to The Ward Singers of Philadelphia (to avoid confusion with groups who tried to plagiarize the Ward sound), the group cut one session for Ivin Ballen during April, 1950 in Philadelphia for Gotham Records. Out of this came the first ever million-selling Post-war gospel record entitled "Surely God is able," the rights to which were bought by Herman Lubinsky when the group returned to Savoy a year later.

The quintet was billed as Gertrude Ward and her daughters until, in the fall of 1950, Martha Bass temporarily joined the group. However, it seems that a second unit billed as The Clara Ward Specials composed of Lil Davis, Frances Steadman, Frances Johnson, and Thelma Jackson were recording for Gotham Records between October 1950 and April of 1954. In 1951, having dropped Martha Bass, Gertrude's Ward Singers, variously billed as Clara Ward or The Famous Ward Singers, recorded for Savoy for a year.

The Gotham label group, along with the inclusion of Clara, recorded as Clara Ward and The Ward Sisters in 1952 for the BBS label. Also during 1952 there came about an amalgamation of the two groups to form one super-group, again variously billed as The Ward Singers, Famous Ward Singers, Clara Ward, or Ward Jubilaires. Long-serving members included Clara, Willa, Gertrude,

Henrietta, Marion, and Frances Steadman. This group recorded for Savoy for three years during which time (off and on) Carrie Williams, Ethel Gilbert, and Kitty Parham sang on the team.

Toni Rose asserts that "The Ward Singers were the first Afro-American concert performers to break the impenetrable barriers of geography and ethnology." In 1956, Clara along with Marion, Frances, and Kitty signed with Don Robey's Houston-based Duke label, with whom the gals cut three singles, one of which, "Redeemed," became a minor hit across the Southern states. In late 1956, The Ward Singers, now made up of Gertrude, Clara, Willa, Marion, Frances, Kitty, and occasionally Henrietta and Esther Ford, were back with Savoy Records once more.

This configuration lasted until (with the exception of sides cut for the Dot label in between) the super-group's demise in 1958. During this time, The Ward Singers were harshly criticized by the older, more conservative members of the Baptist church for their sharp clothes, outrageous wigs, and polished dance step routines.

In late 1958, Marion, along with Frances, Kitty, Henrietta, and Esther, split away from The Ward Singers, and founded The Stars of Faith. The Stars of Faith recorded for Savoy and a host of other labels and are active today on the U.S. and European gospel touring circuit. Starting in 1959, The Clara Ward Singers group cut three albums for Dot and one for Forum Circle but by now there existed three official Ward Singers touring outfits. The Willa Ward Singers, who lasted from 1963 through 1978, Clara and The Famous Ward

Singers who were at times composed of former Clara Ward singers, and a West Coast incarnation, The Gertrude Ward Singers whose leading lights over a thirty year span included Vermettya Royster and Odessa Perkins. Various combinations of The Clara Ward Singers recorded for Savoy, Vanguard, Columbia, Tuba, Verve, and on Capitol Records cut a bunch of secular recordings before joining the Nashboro gospel family in the early 1970s.

This CD contains all twenty one of the cuts issued on Nashboro 2-7222, *The Very Greatest*, released in 1980 and finds Clara in four settings as soloist, in live concert, with a choir background, and of course with The Famous Ward Singers.

The set fires off with Clara and The Wards's combat attack on "Never a man spoke like this man," a biographical profile of the son of God. Piano, strings, and The Essence Choir join Clara on a contemporary rendition of "We need Thee." Peace and warmth surround a solo warbling of Charles A. Tindley's "Some day," here rendered under the title "Beams of heaven." Supported by piano and organ, Clara gives the song her charismatic best. More tribulation is heralded on the rousing Wards-sung "We'll soon be done with the troubles and trials," a reconstruction of the song "One of these days."

Clara joins The Essence Choir on a sweeping, orchestral reading of "That's what I've been looking for." A sequence of live performances explodes into the living room, beginning with the break-neck "Meetin' tonight," "Come in the room," and "I'm a soldier in the army of the Lord." A breather is taken by The Wards during a solo, oper-

atic scorching of "It is well with my soul" sung as writer H.G. Spafford would have wanted it. "When we all get to heaven" finds us back in the studio clapping our hands and stomping our feet. One can picture the engineer doing a holiness dance on the pots of the control console.

Another contemporary interpretation is given on "Set me free," a soulful chart full of well written lyrics and articulate sentiments. Choir and full orchestral prominence are given an outing on a chipper "Thank you for coming into my life" which should stir the hearts of youthful enthusiasts. Clara gives a persuasive performance of "I love the name Jesus" sung without frill or decoration. The Wards guide us back into the express lane with a throat-stretching skirmish of "What could I do, what could I say." Clara returns to front center stage with a live, impressive workout of "What Jesus is to me," a performance which goes to prove that the gal still has what it takes.

Younger listeners with choir experience will enjoy the lively "All by myself." The Essence Choir rocks the church on this one. "Run on" has The Wards bashing tambourines and studio staff steaming up the glass of the control booth. Clara stretches out behind a choral arrangement of "For the rest of my life (I'm gonna hold on)" accompanied by spacey organ, orchestral fills, and piano dynamism. A comforting solo translation is given "I'm going there" recorded live. The Wards provide a fabulously exciting execution of "You're gonna miss your chance," an outstanding bright spot in the collection.

A good old down home atmosphere is evoked on "In the morning," one of The Wards' finer late recordings. William Edie Marks' classic "Last mile of the way" is given an impassioned once-over, and Clara fills out the song with rapturous grace.

Clara left this life in 1973 and her mother Gertrude passed away in 1981. The great Marion Williams died last year from complications stemming from a diabetic condition. The amputation of both her legs at the thigh proved too great a shock, a tragic loss coming at a time when her great talent was at last being recognized. In 1959, Willa and her father George founded The Ward's House of Music, a Philadelphia-based gospel sheet music and music bookstore. In 1968, Willa quit the retail business and went on the road as a single. As singer and pianist, Willa drew material from both gospel and secular songbooks and has recently enjoyed working on the cruise ship Crown Prince Harold.

— Opal L. Nations - March, 1995



Clara Ward with producer Shannon Williams.

Executive Producers Patti Drosins and Rob Santos
Reissue produced by Robert Y. Kim and Opal Louis Nations
Originally produced and compiled by Shannon Williams
Art Direction/Design by Mitchell Kanner
Liner notes by Opal Louis Nations
Mastered by Walter DeVenne
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