

Spirituals of the Old South



THE COLEMAN BROTHERS





It's quite extraordinary to think that the Colemans, so much a part of the transitory impetus that took gospel quartet from disciplined jubilee singing into "hard," uninhibited "shout," would be left out of the CD reissue market entirely. In fact, they were never even culled for release in times of vinyl, except for six songs on the long out of print Gospel Heritage label (Newark Gospel Quartets H9324, 1990.) The recorded Coleman outfit cut at least eighteen records during their most visible period (mid to late 1940s) and were able, like most black quartets struggling to survive in a limited competitive market, to pitch when needed folk, R&B, country and pop tunes with equal skill.

As stated in Peter Grendysa's excellent feature article on the Colemans in *Rhythm & News Magazine* (#18/19, Nov. 2003), the group's 78s are valued items, prized for their superior harmony and musical content. The genius behind the Colemans on record is Lander Coleman, second lead tenor, broadcaster, quartet manager, composer, engineer, producer, record label manager and night club owner. Lander was born on April 26, 1913. Lander's most significant gift to gospel was the writing of "Milky White Way," a song which sold in the thousands when it was covered by the CBS Trumpeteers in early 1948.

The Colemans had recorded their original in December 1944, but because Irving Berman, proprietor of Regis/Manor, the label with which the Colemans were under contract, chose not to put it out until April 1948, the CBS Trumpeteers stole most of the song's early runaway sales. This infuriated Lander to such an extent that he elected to concentrate most of his energies on his own freshly launched record label. More on that later.

The Colemans, like the Norfleet Brothers of Chicago, were a large singing family. Whereas the Norfleet clan hailed from Marion, Alabama, the Coleman brood was originally from Kenbridge, Virginia, not far from Lunenburg where a sizeable gospel scene thrived. Lander, for instance, came from a family of ten sons and two daughters. Both his father and grandfather were ministers, so it was quite natural for him to grow up in a strong church environment with elders who frowned on the participation in any music outside of that played in the church.

The first Coleman family aggregation dates back to 1917 when various members of the Coleman clan relocated to Montclair, New Jersey where lucrative employment opportunities were more bountiful. This group included four of Lander's uncles (Levi, Lewis, Matthew and David Coleman) who brought their families. All had had prior church singing experience back in Kenbridge. This Coleman group sang spirituals and jubilees in churches and meeting halls throughout New Jersey. The group never recorded and disbanded in 1926.

Lander and his family moved out to Montclair, New Jersey in 1925 when he was eleven years old. Just prior to the breaking up of the first Coleman group, a second was formed from members of Lander's family, namely Wallace, tenor, Everette, lead and Jack, bass, plus outsiders Robert Tippins, baritone, from Atlanta and Howard Harris, second baritone. This group also stayed with spirituals and jubilees and began working church venues and local concert programs. So swift did the second outfit's reputation increase that they had firmly established themselves in the community before the first group had retired.

A second junior Coleman group labelled the Jubilee Four soon emerged out of sixteen year old second tenor Lander plus outsider Robert Bright, a twelve-year-old baritone. The Jubilee Four charmed their patrons with skilled renderings of gospel standards like "Get right with God" and Cedelia Martin's "His eye is on the sparrow." The Jubilee Four travelled as far as Pennsylvania and New York to out of town concerts. Both the Royal-Lites of Philadelphia and Norfolk Jubilees (who were extremely popular at the time on Paramount Records) exerted influence on the teenage singers. In 1932 the Colemans and Jubilee Four merged to form one Coleman Brothers group. Variable membership included Everette, Lander, Wallace and Melvin plus, on occasion when the need arose, John Pettis, second tenor, and John Tyler, bass, both from the competing Royal-Lites.

A year later, Everette switched to guitar accompaniment and seventeen-year-old first tenor Russell Coleman took his place. By 1935 the group had crystallized with the addition of Danny Owens who went on to sing and record with the Melody Masters in 1947 and Four

Tunes in 1948. In 1932 Mervyn LeRoy made a movie called "I am a fugitive from a chain gang" starring Paul Muni, based on Robert E. Burns' (the fugitive's) book. Burns was an innocent man brutally victimized by the criminal justice system. The celebrated movie had made Burns a sensational public figure. Having moved to New Jersey, Burns planned to further capitalize on his misfortunate adventures by writing a stage drama around them. Burns chose to open his play in 1934 at Atlantic City's Steel Pier. The troupe included a singing group called the Chain Gang quartet. Burns, who was familiar with Lander Coleman's work, picked him to lead the group which also featured first tenor Jessie Ventermin, basso Harrison Kidd and baritone J. Lynn. The stripe-suited Chain Gang Quartet sang spirituals and work songs in the stage show plus made appearances on live radio broadcasts. The quartet disbanded in 1935 and Lander returned to the family group.

From 1935 to 1942 the Colemans were familiar figures on numerous package tours of the South and West, appearing with such notable artists as the 5 Soul Stirrers and Dixie Hummingbirds. They garnered radio shows on WHBI in Newark and WPAT in Patterson, New Jersey. The coming aboard of manager Milt Lasnick in late 1943 turned out to be a blessing. Lasnick arranged a recording contract with Decca with whom they waxed the traditional "Low down the chariot" plus their often requested version of "His eye is on a sparrow" which was reissued again in 1949 on the label's Coral subsidiary. "Low down the chariot" sold well for Decca but not well enough for them to issue more recordings right away.

In 1943 Barney Josephson opened New York's Café Society. Work at the club forced the group to establish New York as their new base. Soon they were broadcasting over WABC, the same station that fired Alan Freed for suspected payola in 1958. Success culminated in a "Staff vocal group" contract with CBS with whom they beamed an early morning program of spirituals, pop songs, hymns, folk tunes, and country numbers. After President Roosevelt's passing, the Colemans broadcast a number of sacred songs over an entire three-day national mourning period. The tribute ran continuously day and night. Roosevelt had done more for African Americans than other presidents in recent times, and with gratitude black people gathered to show their respect.

Regis Records, with whom the Colemans had signed a contract and had cut some songs back in 1943, began to issue this material on their new Manor label imprint. Three releases appeared over a period of approximately a year, the first being the gospel ballad "That's my desire" (not to be confused with Frankie Laine's opus), followed by "New milky white way" and "I can see everybody's mother but mine." Later on all three 78 RPM releases were issued in an attractive, colourful album set entitled "Spirituals of the Old South."

In late 1944 the Colemans pooled resources and set up the Coleman Brothers Company, a recording enterprise at first set up to promote African American gospel recordings, dwelling on not only their talents but the skills and ability of those who had become their trusted friends out on the road. They included widely known names such as the Dixieaires, Blind Boys of Mississippi and the National Clouds of Joy. Melvin was set up as president, Lander served as vice president and Russell as secretary. The record company was situated beneath what was to become the 72-room Coleman Hotel at 59 Court Street in Newark, N.J. A recording and broadcast studio was installed and a live hook-up with Newark's WHBI was set up. The Colemans broadcast over WHBI twice each Sunday at 12:30 and 4:30 p.m. The Coleman Hotel provided warehouse space and reasonable accommodation for visiting and/or recording talent who invariably had little money.

Six Coleman Brothers releases appeared on their imprint, all recorded in 1945-46 and issued over a period of four years. Decca, who still owned held-back sides on the group at that time, continued to issue material into 1946. Because Coleman Enterprises grew rapidly, Melvin was forced to retire from the singing group. He was replaced by basso A.J. Eldridge from Hartford, Conn. Eldridge became one of the family and was considered a brother. To cater more to minority viewers, the Colemans were brought in by NBC to work on a coffee commercial for Chase & Sanborn. The group toured extensively and landed a contract with the pioneering WLW in Cincinnati. This necessitated a move to Ohio.

In 1947 Manor Records, who still had material left in the can, issued two further releases by

the Colemans. While at WLW-TV, the Colemans did commercials on a variety of daytime shows. They also won a contract to do a series of spots for Western Auto Stores. The Colemans showed up at country fairs as part of the WLW Road Show. The latter part of 1948 saw the resumption of extensive tours across the U.S., Canada and Hawaii. The Coleman label enjoyed a sizeable hit with the Ray-O-Vacs' chirping "I'll always be in love with you," a song first introduced by Morton Downey in 1929 in the movie "Syncopation."

On January 24, 1934 Carrie, wife of Wallace Coleman (who had sung baritone in Lander's first Coleman Brothers group) gave birth to Cynthia Coleman, child prodigy. Under the stage name of Ann Cole, Cynthia became a hot R & B item during the 1950s. Lander was immediately taken by Cynthia's singing talent and she in turn drew courage and inspiration from him. At age twelve she was singing in her grandfather's, the Rev. William Coleman's, church in Boxhall, New Jersey. She was often featured on Coleman Brothers concerts with stellar talent such as the Golden Gate Quartet (who had been firm friends with the Colemans since the beginning of their illustrious career), and the Southern Sons.

By 1949, when she was only fifteen, she had formed her own gospel group, the Colemanaires, comprised of Coleman clan members, all of whom were cousins. Rev. Joe Walker sat in on piano and sang first tenor. Sam Walker was second tenor and Wesley Johnson sang baritone. Both Cynthia and Joe shared lead vocals most of the time. The group went on to become one of Newark's most exciting gospel acts. In 1953-54 they waxed a total of five highly rewarding records for Apollo and Timely. In 1956 Cynthia crossed into R & B. Lander remained her favourite uncle.

In January 1949 Decca reissued "Low down the chariot" on their Coral subsidiary, and Manor reissued "Plenty of room in the kingdom" on their Arco imprint. By late 1949 the Colemans had appeared with virtually every major gospel performer on the circuit, including Mahalia Jackson and Sister Rosetta Tharpe. They had done it all and were looking around for other challenges. Fortunately, they did not have to wait too long. Regal Records' A & R man, Howard Biggs, was searching for background singers to support some of the label's talent. Biggs, who was a fan

of the group, took the outfit to Fred Mendelsohn at Regal and the contract was signed.

The Colemans' first Regal outing was behind Paul Gayten on his vocal interpretation of Huddie Leadbetter's "Goodnight Irene." The record sold fairly well. After the Ray-O-Vacs' successful waxing, the Coleman label was picked up by one of the Mid-West's leading distributors, United, on Cottage Grove in Chicago. By 1951 the Coleman Brothers' touring schedule had chalked up an annual average of 50,000 miles, spanning the years 1948-1951. Following two secular sessions for Regal, from which two single releases emerged, the group decided to call it quits. Constant travelling had taken its toll on everybody.

Lander Coleman took over ownership and management of a North Newark supper club and kept it running for many years. In November 1952 Larry Smith (formerly of Derby Records) took over general management at Coleman Records. Big band arranger Benny Wells assumed control of A & R. The label folded in 1954 and was gobbled up by Herman Lubinsky of Savoy in 1960, a year after Melvin's demise. Lander returned to the recording studio in 1974 with a fresh set of Coleman Brothers. This time it was Savoy Records calling the shots. This group consisted of Lander, first tenor, John Bryant, second tenor, Millard G. Thomas, tenor, Fred Perry, baritone, and A.J. Eldridge, bass. The result was an album entitled "Milky White Way." The title track was given a righteous treatment as was a retread of "My prayer" and "Gospel train."


Had the group been allowed to record a-cappella, we might have caught a glimpse of bygone artistry. However, they might have been able to try this had it not been for the fact that Perry and Bryant got in the way of a hail of bullets during an armed robbery in New York. Good news is they were not seriously hurt and survived the attack. But the outcome resulted in the disbandment of the group. Lander Coleman passed away in Irvington, New Jersey on May 3rd, 2001.

As Peter Grendysa points out, the songs of the Colemans have brought joy to countless millions. Let us hope that a revival of this type of classic gospel singing comes to flower in our lifetime.

- Opal Louis Nations, February 2006 With invaluable help from Peter Grendysa

5 - VOICES and a GUITAR - 5
(ALL BROTHERS)
Have Rendered Over 5000 Concerts

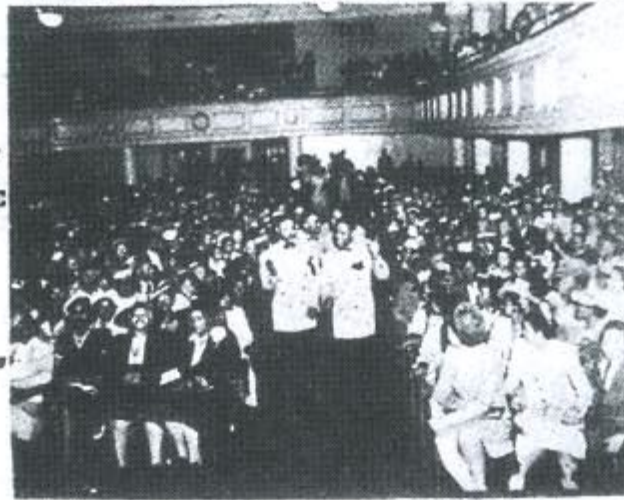
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THE COLEMAN BROS.
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THE
MILKY
WHITE
WAY
Dooce
Recording
Artists

I
CAN
SEE
EVERYBODY'S
MOTHER
BUT
MINE

The Coleman Bros. as they sing "Yes We All Shall Meet In Heaven"

Russell Coleman (1st tenor); Lander Coleman (2nd tenor); Everette Coleman, Danny Owens (tenors); Wallace Coleman (baritone); A.J. Eldridge (bass); with Everette Coleman (guitar) plus unk piano; organ; drums. c. January 1948

- 1 LONESOME VALLEY (COLEMAN 5961)
(Arr. Lander Coleman)
- 2 ONE DAY (COLEMAN 5961)
(Martin-Morris)
- 3 MY PRAYER (COLEMAN 5964)
(Millard Thomas)
- 4 YOU MAY RUN ON (COLEMAN 5964)
(Trad arr Coleman)
- 5 BROTHER (COLEMAN 5985)
(Lander Coleman)
- 6 PACKING UP (COLEMAN 5985)
(Herbert Brewster)
- 7 FORGIVE ME LORD (COLEMAN 6004)
(Lander Coleman)
- 8 YES WE SHALL ALL MEET IN
HEAVEN (COLEMAN 6004) (Lander Coleman)
- 9 DRY BONES (COLEMAN 6018)
(Trad Arr Coleman)
- 10 WALLS OF JERICHO (COLEMAN 6018)
(Trad Arr Coleman)

As above 23rd May 1946

- 11 SEEK (DECCA 48051)
(Trad Arr Coleman)
- 12 WE'RE LIVING HUMBLE (DECCA 48051)
(Trad Arr Coleman)

Russell Coleman (1st tenor); Lander Coleman (2nd tenor); Everette Coleman, Danny Owens (tenors); Wallace Coleman (baritone); Melvin Coleman (bass); with Everette Coleman (guitar) plus unk piano; organ; drums.
NYC March 21st 1944

- 13 SENDING UP MY TIMBER
(DECCA 48041) (Trad Arr Coleman)
- 14 WERE SHALL I BE (DECCA 48041)
(Charles Price Jones)
- 15 HIS EYE IS ON THE SPARROW
(DECCA 48081) (C.D. Martin)
- 16 LOW DOWN THE CHARIOT
(DECCA 48081) (Trad Arr Coleman)
- 17 GET AWAY, MR SATAN, GET AWAY
(DECCA 8673) (Lange-Heath-Loring)
- 18 RAISE A RUCKUS TONIGHT
(DECCA 8673) (Bridges)

CBS Radio "The CBS Hootenanny Show" transcription 10th March 1947

- 19 ROCK MY SOUL/RUN ON FOR A LONG
TIME (HOOTENANNY) (Trad Arr Coleman)

Russell Coleman (1st tenor); Lander Coleman (2nd tenor); Everette Coleman, Danny Owens (tenors); Wallace Coleman (baritone); Melvin Coleman (bass); with Everette Coleman (guitar) plus unk piano; organ; drums. October 1943

- 20 IT'S MY DESIRE (MANOR100) (Trad Arr Coleman)
- 21 WE'LL UNDERSTAND (MANOR 101)
(Trad Arr Coleman - Berman)
- 22 NEW(OH) WHAT A TIME (MANOR 1055)
(Trad Arr Coleman)

Russell Coleman (1st tenor); Lander Coleman (2nd tenor); Everette Coleman, Danny Owens (tenors); Wallace Coleman (baritone); Melvin Coleman (bass); with Everette Coleman (guitar) plus unk piano; organ; drums. December 1944

- 23 I CAN SEE EVERYBODY'S MOTHER
(MANOR102) (Emma L.Jackson)
- 24 PLENTY OF ROOM IN THE KINGDOM
(MANOR 102) (Trad Arr Coleman)
- 25 THE END OF MY JOURNEY (MANOR
100) (Trad Arr Coleman)
- 26 NEW MILKY WHITE WAY (MANOR 101)
(Trad Arr Coleman)

Russell Coleman (1st tenor); Lander Coleman (2nd tenor); Everette Coleman, Danny Owens (tenors); Wallace Coleman (baritone); A.J.Eldridge (bass); with Everette Coleman (guitar) plus unk piano; organ; drums. February 1947

- 27 HIS EYE IS ON THE SPARROW
(MANOR 1065) (C.D. Martin)
- 28 NOAH (MANOR 1065) (Trad Arr Coleman)
- 29 GOODNIGHT IRENE (REGENT 3281)
(Ledbetter-Lomax)

All photos, memorabilia etc. courtesy Opal Louis Nations.

This CD derives from very rare and old 78rpm recordings many of which were originally manufactured in small quantities. There will therefore be a significant amount of surface noise audible. Whilst we have removed much extraneous noise it was considered that any further use of noise reduction programmes would compromise the integrity of the original recordings.

