



**THE GOLDEN ECHOES (GOSPEL SINGERS)**

OLLIE COLLINS JR. – TOP ROW, THIRD FROM THE LEFT

## **Ollie Collins Jr – “The Man with the Golden Voice”**

**by Opal Louis Nations**

At first listen, Ollie Collins Jr’s delicately melismatic and exquisitely sublime vocal style reminds us of the Memphis soul tradition. After all, Collins was born and raised in Saltillo, Mississippi, less than a hundred miles south-east of Memphis. Names like James Carr and the Southern Wonder Juniors, O.V. Wright and the Sunset Travelers and namesake Ollie (Hoskins) Nightingale and the Dixie Nightingales all spring to mind. But, unlike Carr, Wright or Nightingale, Collins never turned his back on the praise of God. Numerous offers were made over the years, offers of bright lights and fancy life-style, but he resolutely turned them all down.

A closer listen presents to us a different path. Our profile of Collins includes the prevailing influence of Baptist minister Rev. Willie Morganfield. Morganfield was also from Mississippi. His father sang in outstanding churches around Memphis. Morganfield was converted at the age of eight and started singing with local gospel groups like the Four Stars (an amateur quartet). In 1947, upon turning professional, Morganfield sang with the famous Kings of Harmony who toured the country extensively. The Kings of Harmony were from Birmingham, Alabama.

Collins and Morganfield probably met up before Morganfield’s move to Cleveland in 1966 to pastor the Christian Baptist Church. Starting in the late Fifties, Collins, having heard Morganfield’s vocal signatures, became profoundly influenced by them. Their singing styles grew on parallel tracks.

Ollie Collins Jr was born to Ollie and Annie Collins in Saltillo, Mississippi, just ten miles north of Tupelo, on January 31<sup>st</sup>, 1940. Europe was at war with Germany and Richard Wright was about to publish “Native son.”

Four years earlier, a massive tornado ripped through Tupelo and more than two hundred people were killed. The city was destroyed. The Collins family were sharecroppers and worked a cotton farm near Birmingham Ridge. Annie, a music instructor, was determined to see her children succeed in life. She tutored them in the ways of the world with a strong, firm hand. Whenever she could, she made sure they learned the lessons taught by the Bible. The Collins family, like many Christian country-folk, sang around the hearth as a vocal group in the evenings. At first, they sang in the shape-note tradition. Shape-note singing dates back to the 1700s as a simplified teaching device in music schools. Shapes were added to the note-heads with written music to help singers find pitches within major and minor scales, as opposed to using more complex key signatures.

Later on, the Collins family group switched to the harmonic quartet approach rather than continue on with the congregational one. Collins remembers singing with his family group outside a church when he was two or three years old. As well as school, young Collins Jr helped his father out in the fields at harvest time.

His first public singing experiences took place at the family church. Annie proudly raised him up onto the offering table and had him sing a while. He was soon concertizing at surrounding churches and at the Tupelo fairgrounds. The Collins family group grew very popular around the Tupelo area. In 1948 they cut a demonstration record but were unable to have it pressed with a regular record company.

Ten years later, in 1958, Collins joined the Golden Echo Gospel Singers who were a local five-member quartet in which Collins sang. He soon found himself managing the group as well. This was where he discovered the need to be a soloist and to go out on his own.

In 1961 he married his childhood sweetheart, Irma Wade of New Albany. They have stayed married ever since. In 1962 they were settled in a ranch home in Dorsey.

Collins quit the vocal group to go solo in 1964 (the Golden Echoes survive to this day and have cut a number of vanity recordings.) Collins did not do so well on the performance circuit. This was despite the fact that the Rev. Willie Morganfield had helped Collins get a start on Ed Wingate's Detroit-based J & W Records. Morganfield himself recorded for Wingate. One release by Collins surfaced in 1965. This was "Take a stand" backed with "What I have searched for," songs Collins had written. The single failed to sell and has since become the rarest release on the label. Wingate also recorded the Rev. Columbus Mann, some of whose congregational material was sold to Motown who issued it on album in 1961. Like the Collins single, the Motown album is one of the rarest in their catalog.

In 1967, Ollie and Irma were persuaded by cousin Lola Williams to move out to Los Angeles, California where Ollie thought he could realize his dreams. When the couple reached L.A. (with only three hundred dollars in Ollie's pocket), everything more or less happened at once. At this point, he was going out as The Man with the Golden Voice. Morganfield had helped Collins get a contract with Don Robey's Song Bird subsidiary in Houston. Collins, who made a habit of writing most of his songs, chose Morganfield as his initial music publisher. In just a matter of weeks Robey had released Collins' first single, the beautifully lyrical "No need to cry." The other side gave us the achingly devout "Without the Lord."

This is where this writer comes in. I was living in West London in 1967 and writing gospel reviews for Blues Unlimited, the first important blues magazine in England, at that time put together with a mimeo machine. Being on Robey's promotional list, I received regular promo singles packages from Houston. One of

them contained Collins's illuminating "Without the Lord" and I recall thinking what a magical voice, full of commitment and heartache. Who is this Ollie Collins Jnr? Well, I never really found the answer until recent times when my friend, the long-serving L.A. gospel disc jockey John Phillips, told me that Collins was a disc jockey in Pontotoc, northern Mississippi, and that he sits with him now on the national Gospel Radio Announcers board. Phillips then put me in touch with Ollie Collins Jnr. and this article came about as a result.

During the 1967-1968 period, Collins found employment working in a paper plant in Los Angeles. On a trip to Rosarita Beach in late 1967, Collins hooked up with Wolfman Jack at the megawatt border radio station XERB near Tijuana owned by Arturo Gonzalez. Wolfman Jack worked for Gonzalez for free in return for commission on all the product he plugged on air which included t-shirts, potency drugs and baby chicks. Robey had just released Collins's second single, "I'm going home," coupled with the beautiful self-penned "This is my prayer." Collins wanted Jack to play it over his 150,000 watt frequency. Wolfman Jack responded by allowing Collins on the air. Collins caught the radio deejay bug immediately and swore to himself he would buy radio time to promote gospel music.

Almost right from the start, Ollie and Irma joined the Victory Baptist Church at 4802 McKinley Avenue. The Victory Baptist was founded by the great leader of the Post-War Los Angeles gospel revival movement, The Rev. A.A. Peters. Under Samuel Spann's direction, Collins sang solos in all four of the church's choirs and later helped with the ministering of the music. As luck would have it, Wolfman Jack got Collins onto XERB. His Sunday slot kicked off as a thirty minute gospel program, then was expanded to an hour, and again to three hours early every morning. From his start at XERB, he moved to L.A.'s KBCA, a jazz station from which Collins broadcast his "Soul Express" show.

Meanwhile, his "This is my prayer" recording started to take off. It was not long before Collins entered the world of television. Appearing on Channel 13's "Dialing for Dollars," Collins expressed the need for spiritual music to be more widely broadcast on television. Allen Sloan, the host of an afternoon program on KCOP, agreed with Collins and helped him in securing time so that he could host his own gospel show. Collins then used the TV format to present and promote the talents of artists like Shirley Caesar, the Clark Sisters and the Mighty Clouds of Joy, as well as others. His TV exposure then took off. He wound up appearing on three TV stations (Channel 40 and 31 included). He came to the conclusion that TV programming presented the best exposure for gospel activity.

Collins continued to serve the L.A. Basin's gospel listening community throughout the Seventies by switching from one radio station to another. Wanting to cover all possible angles, he owned and operated three record stores for a short period of time.

Collins' third Song Bird single emerged in 1970. "The sound of music" was pitched with "He'll never turn me away." A fourth release, "The Man I serve" backed with "Hold on to His hand," hit the streets the following year. Collins was now in his stride and his popularity increased but he was getting more and more uncomfortable with the fact that Los Angelinos tended to speak unkindly behind the backs of their friends. The pace of life was beginning to run him ragged. He missed the laid-back way of life back in Mississippi.

Robey issued Collins' fifth and final single in 1972 which coupled "My plea to sinners" with "What prayer can do."

Robey sold the assets of his Peacock / Song Bird discery to ABC Records in May, 1973. He was kept on in an advisory capacity for two years during which time Collins' five afore-mentioned singles (co-produced by the Rev. Oris Mays, Robert Evans and Willie Morganfield) were reissued on Collins' first and last ABC album entitled "The Sound of Music" (reissued on MCA 28064.) By now he was featured on KTYM's "Radio Daily" 1460 A.M. and XPRS's 1090 A.M. on Sundays. He was also hosting a gospel / pop TV program. At his peak, Collins spent fifty-one hours on the air per week.

Collins' second album, entitled "Too Close – Live at Gertrude Ward's Temple For All People," was a sensational sanctified collection of riveting songs such as Alex Bradford's "I'm too close," Claude Jeter's arrangement of "Pass me not, Precious Lord," "Live the life," "Thank you Sir," "Touch His garment," "Only believe" and "Stand by me." The album release on L.A.'s Goodie Train label sold well in the Southlands and other parts of California.

Collins also spent the 1970s and 1980s on FM radio KBCA at 105.1. He hosted his first L.A. cable TV show between the years 1991 and 1995. Although Irma almost always took a back seat, her time to step into the limelight came in 1993. She always possessed a strong and beautiful voice and she used it to sing "God bless America" at President Clinton's Inaugural Ball in January 1993. She was one of twenty performers picked from a pool of 1,300 candidates to sing at the extravaganza.

Collins always wanted to own his own radio station. Up until 1989, he had always rented time. In 1989, he got a chance to purchase WSEL, both 99.7 FM and 1440 AM, on the outskirts of Pontotoc, just a few miles from where he was born and raised. Collins, who never quite fit in with the Southern California lifestyle, knew that his rightful place was back in Northern Mississippi. Ollie and Irma moved back for good in 1995. Six years of having to shuttle back and forth between Los Angeles and Tupelo proved to be a nightmare. They were thankful it was over.

Ollie Collins has enjoyed other album releases over the years. These include a collection entitled "I've Come a Long Way," released in 1989. Collins says it was recorded in Jackson, Mississippi for the small aforementioned J & W label with whom Spencer Taylor and the Highway Q C's recently cut sides.

In 2005, Collins started "Down South With Ollie Collins," a weekly gospel and variety show that aired for ninety minutes each Saturday on Tupelo's cable Channel 3. The show was shut down and revived in June 2009 as a one-hour program entitled "Down South." It continues to run Monday through Friday every week featuring gospel music, positive stories and interviews with people from all walks of life. For Collins, radio runs in the blood. Helping regular folk and having them tell the good things in their lives are his principal concerns.

— Opal Louis Nations  
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