



“The Consolers of South Miami, Florida” –

by Opal Louis Nations

Some people equate the Consolers with Blind Mamie & A.C. Forehand of Memphis. The Forehands were a porch and street-singing husband and wife team taken to rendering hymns and old spirituals in the plaintive, down-home country way. The Forehands accompanied themselves with guitar and finger bells and performed in a sweet yet spiritual style, more akin to the folk-blues idiom than to church music. The Consolers’ approach was gut-bucket, primitive and as honest and down-to-earth as was the African American communities native of the Gulf Coast Hurricane Belt.

Other people equate the Consolers with the Sacred Steel guitar tradition akin to the Keith and Jewell Denomination of the Holiness-Pentecostal church (or Church of The Living God.) It is true that the Pentecostal Church, which had spread rapidly throughout all of Florida by the time the Consolers began their career, would have influenced them, both with their music and ways of worship. It is also true that Sullivan Pugh played an electrified instrument slung around his chest, face up, as would a steel player, but this was only because he had learned to play on a tabletop and had found comfort in this position.

The duo’s principal inspirations were the soulful-sounding Soul Stirrers Quartet and the not so widely known National Gospel Twins of Delray Beach (north of Fort Lauderdale.) The National Gospel Twins, a.k.a. The Quinsette Singers (brother and sister Quince), had a history dating back to the Post-war era. They too accompanied themselves with guitar and sung in a sanctified, alternating vocal style. Sadly their recordings were few, sporadic and are now hard to find.

The Consolers were Sullivan S. and Iola Lewis Pugh. Sullivan, the youngest of four brothers and one sister, was born in 1925 in Moore Haven, Glades County, Florida. Moore Haven is on the south-west coast of Florida's largest lake, Lake Okeechobee. In mid-September 1926 a hurricane hit Florida and Alabama killing 243 people. The massive storm passed over Okeechobee killing Sullivan's mother when a dike burst open and she was drowned. (The hurricane was the subject of the shape-note version of the song "Florida Storm" found in the Florida Folk-Life Archives.)

The six orphaned children were offered up for adoption and three, Sullivan, James and Essie, were taken in by James and Virginia Pugh of Punta Gorda in Charlotte County on Florida's West Coast. As a child Sullivan sang spirituals for the Holiness Church and walked long, sandy roads to Bakers Academy School. He entered his first gospel singing contest at age four and won first prize--a chocolate cake. He also attended local schools. In 1949 Sullivan moved to Miami to find work.

Iola Lewis was born July 22nd, 1926, the third oldest of four daughters, in Cottonton, Russell County, Alabama. Cottonton was then a farming community near the Chattahoochee River not far from Columbus, Georgia. Iola's mother, Estelle Lewis, died when Iola was three years old. Iola and her three sisters were subsequently raised by their maternal grandmother. Grandmother, Shirley Wilbon (or "Kitty" Wilbon) had a farmhouse situated on the Columbus Eufaula Road in Jernigan, Russell County, Alabama. Shirley, who was widowed, struggled to raise seven children. Lenore (or Lenore), Erdie (or Eldie), Iola and twins Hellen & Ellen were all grandchildren. In addition there were Shirley's own two teenage children, daughter Annie and son Mery.

When Iola was eleven the family moved north to Columbus, Georgia where Iola completed high school. For a short time she attended Claffin College in Orangeburg, South Carolina. Then she moved with her father to Miami in 1947. Sullivan met his future wife when Iola was with the Miami Gospel Singers in 1949. They were both attending a gospel tent meeting in Overtown. They married nine months later before Iola's family had moved to Miami from Columbus. The Miami Gospel Singers evolved into the Miami Soul Stirrers composed of Sullivan, guitar and tenor vocals, plus Iola and Pearl Nance-Rayford in vocal support. They first sang spirituals and hymns, but as Sullivan's self-taught guitar playing and songwriting talents improved, he composed songs to suit their own feelings. Sullivan tuned his guitar to an open chord and fretted the strings by reaching over the top of the instrument's neck to barre with his thumbs.

In October 1952 they recorded for Glory Records in Miami, proprietored by Andy Razal and Henry Stone. Chances are that the trio was introduced to Razal and Stone by the Spiritual Harmonizers who were Miami's most treasured quartet. The Miami Soul Stirrers cut two not so promising sessions at Henry Stone's home studio before the label was acquired by Syd Nathan's discery in Cincinnati in August 1953. Their first try on Nathan's De Luxe subsidiary (with Nance-Rayford now gone) did not do well either despite the duo's impressive rendition of Willa A. Townsend's "Wade in the water."

At De Luxe they had changed names to the Spiritual Consolers to avoid confusion with other Soul Stirrers groups. A second session was conducted in Miami during March 1954 for De Luxe Records but nothing was issued. Better luck was had out on the road where they made new fans out in South Florida, Alabama and in the Carolinas. Iola and Sullivan's raw and real preacherly vocals and sparse but dramatic guitar fills were gaining notices everywhere. This was a cast iron formula the couple adamantly stuck to for half a century. The only change was the use of additional instruments on recording dates. Rev. Leon English is thought to have accompanied on organ for some of the Miami sessions. As the Pughs saw it their mission to bring

consolation to those in need, they again opted to change names to the Consolers. They also later founded The Consolers Progressive Charity Club to give food, clothing and money to poor people. All this was sponsored by their church, the House of Joy First Born Church of the Living God in Liberty City.

In 1955 the Consolers put around (wrote letters) to try to get with another label. They tried Specialty, Peacock and Nashboro. They decided to go with Nashboro. Ernie Young at Nashboro first recorded the group in early December 1955 but was unimpressed with the results. He tried again over the Christmas season with better luck. It was here the Consolers recorded their nationwide signature opus, "Give me my flowers" (based on Peetie Wheatstraw's 1941 Decca blues classic, "Bring me flowers while I'm living") which launched them into a long (25 album release) contract with Nashboro Records in Nashville that lasted until 1979. From 1955 on, Ernie Young added piano and/or organ and sometimes drums for studio sessions at Criteria Studios.

The Consolers' concerts opened with "Give me my flowers" after which Sullivan ceremoniously presented lola with a bouquet.

In 1963 they struck pay-dirt again with "Waiting for my child to come home," said too have gone "golden" and considered the duo's finest rendering. It was written in consideration of all those parents who had children that strayed from home. A third major seller came in 1969 with "May the work I've done speak for me." Others, like "(Somewhere) Around God's throne," "Lord, if I'm too high bring me down," "I shall not want" and "Glad to be in that number," were among minor successes.

The duo was based in Philadelphia for a while where they rented part of Willie Eason's home.

In 1971-1972 they appeared at the Apollo Theatre, Madison Square Garden and at the Newport Jazz Festival. The Consolers were recipients of the Thomas A. Dorsey song-writers award for their work, some of which has been recorded by Shirley Caesar, the Mighty Clouds of Joy and Rev. James Cleveland. According to the Florida Folk Heritage Foundation, they appeared in concerts in the Bahamas, England, Africa and Canada. The Consolers continued to concertize at church conventions and camp meetings. The couple recorded two albums for Herman Lubinsky's Savoy Records in the early 1980s. They sent demos to Air Records in Atlanta and were recorded by them in the early 1990s.

The duo remained on the road right up to lola's demise on October 11, 1994. She had reported respiratory problems and passed away at Miami's North Shore Hospital. The couple had just completed an eight-week concert tour, taking in four mid-Western states. It seemed that this disastrous consequence made little difference to Sullivan's mission. He soldiered on masquerading as the Consolers on the public stage as if lola was right there beside him. Sullivan died at home in Northwest Dade on December 30, 2010. Funeral services were conducted a week later at The Bethel Apostolic Temple in Miami. The couple was given The Florida Folk Heritage Award in 2002. The Consolers were one of the few who remained as true to themselves as to others, throughout their long singing careers.

-- Opal Louis Nations
January 2013

Thanks to Eric LeBlanc, Bob Stone and Bob Eagle for supplying biographical information