

DAVIS SISTERS 1949 - 1952



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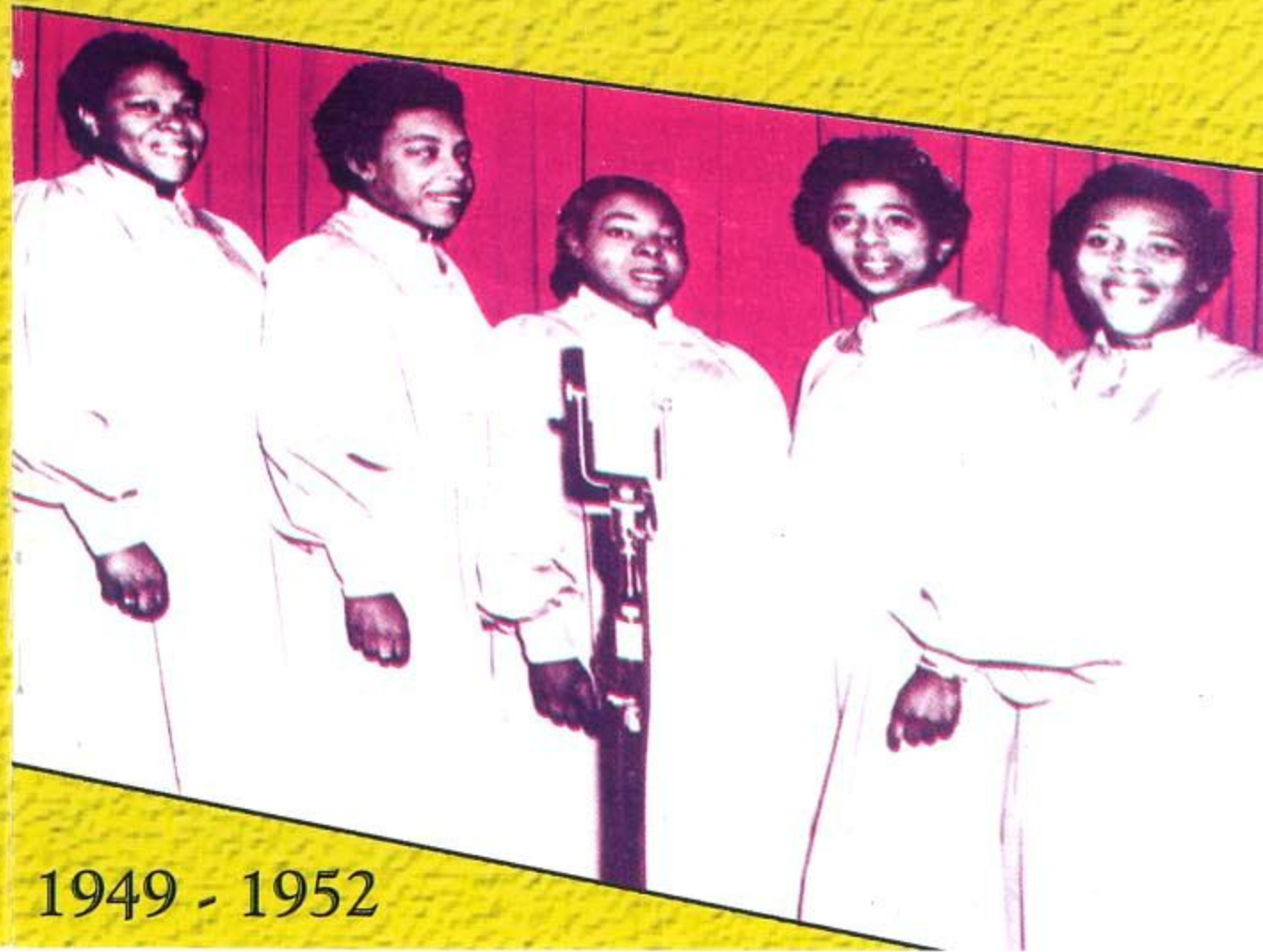
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DAVIS SISTERS



1949 - 1952

The Davis Sisters are today considered as having been one of the finest and most glorious powerhouse, born-again Pentecostal-driven groups in Post-War gospel history. "They were awesome," says the late J.W. Alexander, tenor and manager of the legendary Pilgrim Travelers who shared the same bill with them at the Apollo Theatre. "They lit up the East Coast," says Brother Joe May's daughter, Annette May (Thomas.)

Gospel luminary Jessy Dixon remembers the Davis Sisters as being so full and rounded in sound that they could have been mistaken for a small choir. "They stood way back from the mike and directed their voices into it," says Dixon and adds that they gave out some of the best singing the world has ever known.

Sadly, every member of the original group has passed on. Thelma died in 1963, accompanist Curtis Dublin, their long-serving pianist, died in 1965, Ruth succumbed to diabetes and passed with a massive, showy funeral in 1970. Audrey died in 1982 and Imogene in 1986. Alfreda passed away in 1989, and Jackie Verdell, (Imogene's replacement) was plucked from our midst only recently.

The Davis Sisters, when they were well established, lived on North Warnock Street in the City of Brotherly Love, Philadelphia. Ruth, or "Baby Sis" as she was affectionately known, was the group's fearsome contralto lead. She stood like a soldier ready to do battle, four square, a mountain of a woman, remembered as "The Big Maybelle of Gospel Music" and idolized by such current artists as Aretha Franklin and Mavis Staples. Both Aretha and Mavis gained strength from Ruth's courage, for Ruth was

afraid of no one. Ruth also possessed an iron-clad religious devotion. "She was the most spiritual singer I have ever heard," said Robert H. Harris, one-time lead singer of the Soul Stirrers.

Thelma Davis sang soprano and when needed handled the spoken narrative (a necessary component when getting the message of the Bible across.) Audrey Davis also sang soprano and Alfreda second contralto. All were inspired by their parents' practice of good old, down home, countryfied Southern church singing. Almost right from the start pianist Curtis Dublin not only played piano but occasionally served as co-lead in the group. Eddie Brown, the husband of Evangelist Rosie Wallace, functioned as pianist in the group later on. Anthony Heilbut states that the Davis Sisters were reared in the fiercely Evangelistic Mount Zion Fire Baptized Holiness Church, founded in 1908 by Bishop and Sister W.E. Fuller in Atlanta, Georgia and that the group based most of their repertoire on that denomination's song book.

Ray Funk states that the sisters sang at revivals for their Evangelist mother. Ruth, who served as a W.A.C. during World War II was said to have been inspired by Dixie Hummingbirds' lead Ira B. Tucker and the great Chicago R & B diva, Dinah Washington.

The Davis Sisters organized themselves into a group in 1945. Ruth was only seventeen, Thelma fifteen, Audrey was barely fourteen, and the young Alfreda was a tot of ten. A year later they made their official debut at their parents' home in Port Deposit, Maryland. With parental blessing, they then followed the Pentecostal circuit, performing in churches and

schools in the North-east. Pianist Curtis Dublin joined in 1947. The nineteen-year-old Dublin, an accomplished keyboardist, played in a style that fused church, jazz and blues piano into one.

Philadelphia during the late 1940s and 1950s was a seething hot-bed of incredible gospel talent. The Angelic Gospel Singers, Spiritual Echoes, Mary Johnson Davis, and Famous Ward Singers all came to prominence in Philadelphia at this time. During the 1940s, Clara Ward's mother Gertrude took the fledgling Davis Sisters under her wing, guided them and taught them courage but, best of all, instilled performance skills. In all probability, Gertrude introduced the group to Ivin Ballen of the Ballen Record Company (Gotham Records) during the spring of 1949. The Ward Singers were already well known to Ballen, and although they were signed to Savoy, Ballen issued Ward titles of his own a year later. Ballen, who set up the Twentieth Century record label just after the War, signed the Davis Sisters to a contract. This three-year pact stated clearly that two initial songs, "Mother Died" and "Each Day," were to be cut for his company and that both songs were for imminent release, yet no evidence suggests that the songs ever hit the commercial market. Sadly, we have been unable to locate these songs for inclusion.

The group's first two known records were issued on Ballen's tiny Apex subsidiary label. Ballen purchased Apex and its parent label, Gotham, from record chain store mogul Sam Goody in January 1948. Goody founded the Gotham label in early 1946 but did not use it to press "race" records.

For the following Davis Sisters session, which took place during the spring of 1950, Ballen brought the group to his Gotham studios in Philadelphia. By this time alto singer Imogene Greene had been taken on to add texture to the group's overall sound. Imogene was from Chicago and had been discovered singing in a church choir by the Reverend James Cleveland (she later went on to serve in the Caravans and James Cleveland's own Gospel All Stars.) Imogene's voice is described by Tony Heilbut as having simultaneously moody, smokey and sometimes seductive colorings. Be that as it may, she certainly added depth and excitement to the group's overall performance. Unfortunately, she never stepped forward to assume lead in the Gotham studios until the summer of 1952 when she headed up "By and By" (Part 1) a double-sided pewburner which became the group's first hit record.

The Davis Sisters' most revered Gotham release was Gotham 736 issued in April 1953. The top-side bears a cover of Professor Alex Bradford's "Too Close To Heaven" which, unlike the original, was so burdened with worry and anguish it almost seems as if "Baby Sis" had taken his song straight to glory. The reverse, "Jesus Steps Right In" (when I need him most), is a gospel penned by Kenneth Morris, given full Pentecostal clout.

Out on the road the Davis Sisters commanded \$250 per performance. During the summer months of 1951 the Gay Sisters were enjoying a huge success with a song called "God will take care of you." To help promote this, the Gays organized a concert package at the Atlanta Auditorium. The

Davis Sisters, who were asked to be a part of the program, tore up the place and stole the show. This phenomenon was witnessed yet again in New York on Sunday, October 10th, 1953 when the Davis Sisters appeared before a full capacity audience on Joe Bostic's Fourth Annual Negro Gospel and Religious Musical Festival (with headliner Mahalia Jackson) at Carnegie Hall, this, in spite of a World Series game across the river at Ebbets Field that same afternoon.

Later accomplishments include the Davis Sisters' legendary performance at the Apollo Theatre on December the 14th, 1956. Organized by WWRL disc jockeys Doc Wheeler and Fred Barr, the star-studded package included the Soul Stirrers and Gospel Harmonettes. The Davis Sisters were still riding high with the enormous success of "Twelve gates to the city," the group's initial release on Savoy in May 1955. In February 1955 the Davis Sisters had inked a pact with Ronnie Williams, one of the East Coast's largest gospel music promoters.

In 1957 the Davis Sisters were included on an across-the-nation package tour with Aretha Franklin, her father, the Reverend Charles Franklin plus a three-foot gospel singing midget, Little Sammy Bryant. That same year Chicago's Maceo Wood Singers sponsored a Cavalcade of Stars concert in Philadelphia. The sellout show featured a singing battle between the Davis Sisters and Gospel Harmonettes or Ruth Davis versus the tortured pipes of Dorothy Love Coates. Imagine the lines of hospital wagons parked outside the concert hall that day. Imagine sisters falling out and white jacketed gospel paramedics loading the limp gurney-laden bodies into the

backs of emergency vehicles.

Opal Louis Nations
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With thanks to Tony Heilbut, Ray Funk, Horace Clarence Boyer and Viv Broughton.



L-R: Audrey, Ruth (front), unknown, Thelma.