

"Chinese Gospel Singers"

The Story of the Gospel Clefs

by Opal Louis Nations

The Gospel Clefs virtually exploded onto the scene in the late 1950s. Their blend - originally conceived as the male quartet's answer to the Clara Ward Singers - was an extension of what Alex Bradford's Bradford Singers had pioneered: a full choral, chord-embraced sound, rife with odd falsetto harmonies, dramatic sweeps and neo-classical piano arrangements. In the words of Anthony Heilbut from his book *The Gospel Sound* (Limelight Editions, 1975), "The Gospel Clefs carried the Rev. Herbert Brewster-Clara Ward approach to composition and arrangement one step further, as did the mixed gender Raymond Rasberry Singers of Cleveland in their own way."

To my mind, the Gospel Clefs would have survived to become one of the nation's prodigious and enduring quartets, were it not for two major factors, one of which was that certain members of the group disfavoured traveling and were reluctant to tour. Touring was expected in those days, as it promoted the latest release, took gospel music out to the public and made money for the record company. A second factor was the change in group membership, a consequence of their unwillingness to travel. This altered the vocal mix and aided in a fluid and necessary development in the evolution of male quartet singing which, as choirs came to the fore, became a scaled-down reflection of the kind of sounds choral aggregations were making under such ground-breaking conductors as James Cleveland and Maceo Woods.

The general public of the late 1950s was not quite ready for the kind of transition demonstrated by the likes of the Gospel Clefs, and their fans gradually lost interest in the group.

This is sad because the Gospel Clefs left us with two earth-shattering anthems, the glorious 'Open Our eyes' and the haunting 'How Long Has It Been Since You Prayed,' both lead by Leon Lumpkins, founder, leader and musical arranger of the group.

HEARTS AND MINDS

Leon was born in Newark before our involvement in World War II. His mother, Leah, played piano by ear. She sang and somehow arranged music for the unrecorded Culver Sisters, all members of Newark's Zion Hill Baptist Church. Leon's classical piano music training began at age eight, a Mr. Arlie Williams was his tutor. A year later, Leon was studying classical piano

under the direction of the noted Helena Neuman, a Polish refugee who opened his heart and mind to all the manifestations of serious music. Leon did so well under Neuman's tutelage that he was made choir director of The Young People's Choir at the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Newark, New Jersey, a post he holds to this day. It should be noted that Alex Bradford, at one point, directed the 120-member strong Senior Choir at the Abyssinian Baptist (recommended is the excellent Columbia Legacy CD for recordings made during Bradford's tenure with the choir, 'The Gospel Sound,' Columbia 57160.)

Through Leon's good work at the Abyssinian Baptist, he was awarded a two-year scholarship to New York's prestigious Juillard School of Music, established in 1905. After two years, Leon went over to New York University where he studied sacred music and composition under the guidance of a Mr. Kriegsfeld. It was during Leon's stint at N.Y.U. that the notion of forming a gospel singing group came up. With cousin Raymond Andrews, he set about the task of putting a quartet together. The initial enlistee was to

become the backbone of the Gospel Clefs, one with a sizable reputation, Joe De Loatch. De Loatch was a principal soloist with the Back Home Choir out of The Greater Harvest Baptist Church in Newark. In July 1957, he had soloed with them at The Newport Jazz Festival on Rhode Island. The results were duly recorded and released on one side of a Verve album shared with Judy Clay and the Drinkard Singers (another of Lumpkins' major musical influences.)

Leon's cousin, Raymond Andrews, who insisted Leon stay in school when all this came together, was star soloist at the St. James AMC Methodist Church and could sing at higher altitudes than Roger Roberts, noted falsetto wunderkind with James Cleveland's Cleveland Singers (also out of New Jersey). He also put the word out among local members of the gospel community. After a series of auditions and rehearsals, Leon and Andrews felt ready to record. Herman Lubinsky at Savoy Records was the only major player in the New

York, Philadelphia and New Jersey area. Although he knew that Lubinsky was less than a straight shooter, and would probably short-change the group, they felt they had no choice but to go with the company who enjoyed the largest sales, the best distribution and the finest gospel talent.

DEBUT ALBUM

The Gospel Clefs auditioned and were awarded a contract. By the time of the first new York session on November 5, 1957, group members included Leon, lead tenor and piano, Rev. Abe Huston, tenor, Enoch Franklin, baritone and tenor, Louis Johnson, tenor, Joe De Loatch, second lead, baritone and bass, Robert Byrd, tenor and baritone, and Raymond



Original Savoy Publicity Photograph. Top: Joe De Loatch. Middle (L-R) Rev. Abe Huston, Raymond Andrews, Robert Byrd. Front (L-R) Enoch Franklin, Leon Lumpkins, Louis Johnson. Courtesy Opal Louis Nations

Andrews, falsetto and contralto tenor. All could sing falsetto when the need arose. Louis Johnson was incorrectly listed in the Hayes and Laughton Gospel Records 1943-69 discography as being the same Louis Johnson who sang in the Swan Silvertones.

Six songs emerged from this Ozzie Cadina-supervised first session. Five appeared on the group's first three singles releases. All six were chosen for their debut album (Savoy 14023.) The first release, 'Wings Of A Dove' lead by the rough pipes of Abe Huston, backed with 'Go Down, Go Down' captained by Joe De Loatch, surfaced around the Christmas season of 1957. The trade magazines, particularly Billboard, adored the Gospel Clefs and awarded their first outing four stars, top-side and flip. 'Wings Of A Dove' is not the Bob Ferguson chart that was made into a major seller by country singer Ferlin Husky in 1960, but a tough-singing chant in waltz time belted out over a shouting chorus.

'Go Down, Go Down' is a typical "expressive" Joe De Loatch vehicle complete with whoops, howls and exclamatory remarks. 'Wings Of A Dove' became a huge hit. "It got us into the Apollo Theatre," says Leon.

(Note: the first of seven appearances at the prestigious Harlem venue.) "It was tough playing at the Apollo

because you had to do all those shows on the same day." Talent on the gospel package shows usually came on between four or six times a day. Each group was required to sing no more than fifteen minutes per show. Arthur Williams, son of gospel promoter Ronnie Williams, became the Gospel Clefs' manager. The Gospel Clefs played the Uptown and The Met in Philadelphia and often traveled with their main source of inspiration, the Ward Singers, up and down the East Coast. "We traveled everywhere," says Leon. "We toured the South and Midwest, but it was in Chicago gospel fans liked us best, Philadelphia after that. It seemed the Gospel Clefs worked in Philadelphia more than any other city in the nation," Leon added.

STEAL AWAY

A March 1958 Billboard awarded the group's second release, 'Steal Away' lead by Leon, coupled with Louis Johnson's rendition of 'Rise Up And Walk', a double four-star rating. 'Steal away' was given an upbeat interpretation and generates genuine excitement. "I'm embarrassed to say, I'm not that pleased with the arrangement," says Leon. 'Rise up and walk' is a kind of standard-bearing marching song, heralding a greater life in paradise. The single sold quite well. In April, the Gospel Clefs were invited to sing at the Du Sable High School in Chicago alongside Maceo Woods and the Maceo Woods Singers who were not too dissimilar in sound to the Gospel Clefs.

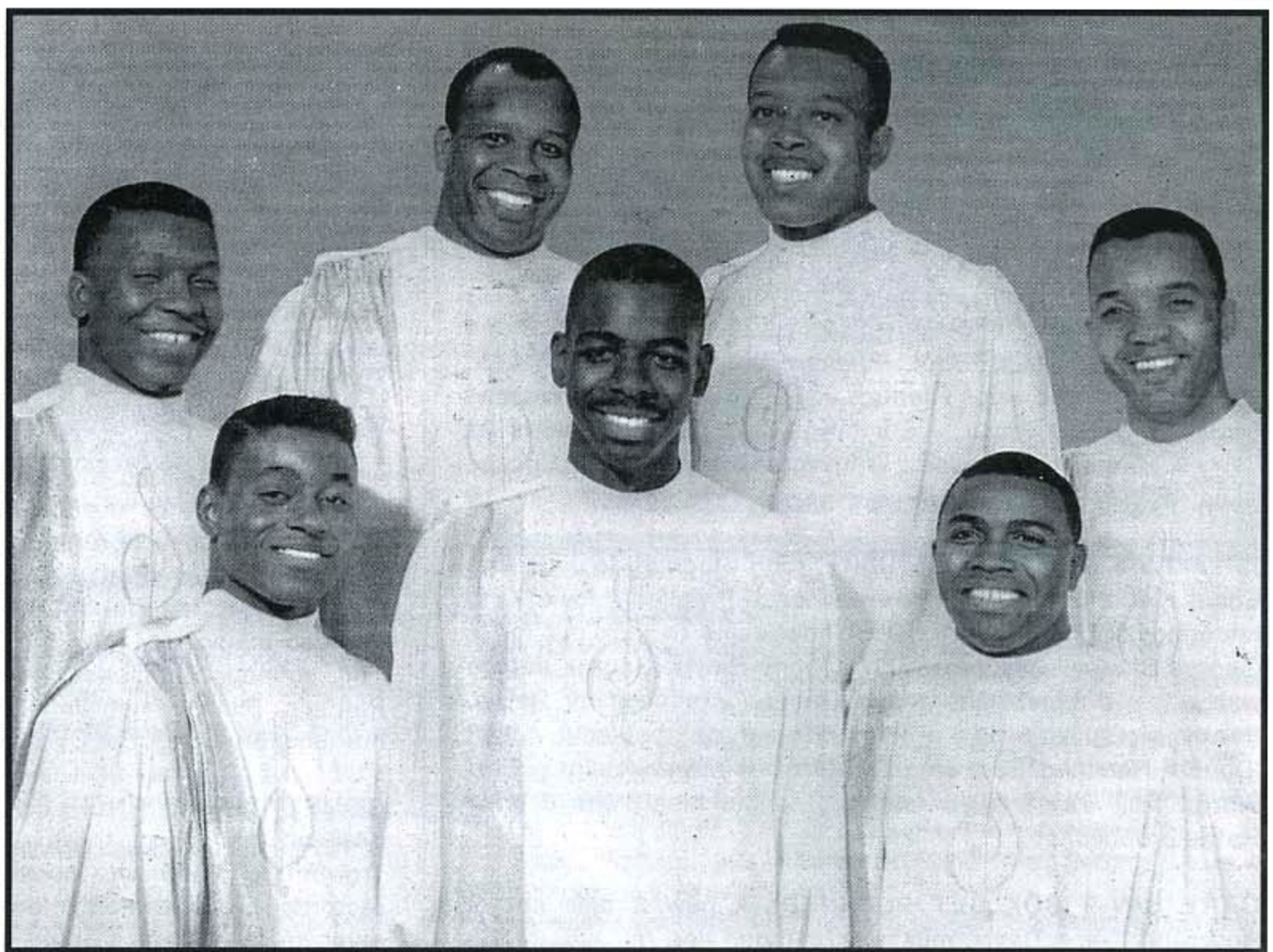
The group's third single emerged in March 1958, shortly after their second New York recording session. The topside featured the fabulous 'How Long Has It Been Since You Prayed,' based on an original song written by gospel artist Robert Martin. Leon had taken the original and had rearranged it to suit his group's needs. "Ideas for songs come to me in different ways," says Leon. "Sometimes I get a flash of an idea, or write from life experience, or I write from something I heard in a dream, or even out of a state of depression. I write well in a depressed state of mind. I use books of synonyms to find rhymes and books of poetry for inspiring lyrics."

'Big Wheel', lead by the dramatic powerhouse vocalizations of Joe De Loatch, constituted the third release's flip side. 'Big Wheel' finds the ensemble in high harmony with Leon's pounding piano egging De Loatch on to even greater heights of vocal dramatization.

During this time, the Gospel Clefs toured with Rev. C.L. Franklin and his daughter Aretha. The tour came west to Oakland, California, and through gospel record store owner and disc jockey Mel Reid's booking, they played the Oakland Auditorium. The group also had offers to tour Europe, but lack of adequate remunerations scotched the idea.

In September 1958, Savoy issued 'Book Of Revelations' backed with 'Rock Me To Sleep' from the March and August sessions. Both songs are pew-torching stompers awarded four stars each by Billboard Magazine. 'Book Of Revelations' climaxes with Andrews's stunning, stratospheric yodels which soar above the rhythmic chorus. The outfit's third New York session of August 1958 marked the apex of the original Gospel Clefs' musical career. Savoy issued 'By The Waters Of Babylon' with the unforgettable gospel anthem 'Open Our eyes.' 'Open Our eyes,' a song entirely conceived by Leon, was, according to Anthony Heilbut, received with mixed blessings. Its peculiar falsetto harmonies and chord progressions were taken by the group's rivals as strange, hence the dubbing "Chinese Gospel Singers".

On the other hand, female fans who had witnessed the group performing



The Gospel Clefs. Left to Right: Louis Johnson, Leon Lumpkins, Rev. Abe Houston, Joe DeLoatch, Robert Byrd, Raymond Andrews, Enoch Franklin

'Open Our Eyes' fell into rapture. Heilbut describes one such fan, a young woman, her hair cropped close, contorted in spiritual agony. The song's moving piano intro, soft, soaring, soulful passages, meaningful lyrics and uplifting choral backgrounds make it a joyous masterpiece, one that never ceases to inspire.

The L.A. based Funk group Earth Wind & Fire covered the song in 1974 but it failed to chart. The Gospel Clefs had to wait almost ten months before 'Open Our Eyes' was finally released in June 1959. But it was worth the wait. The group found themselves working all the time. The record must have sold in the hundreds of thousands, but as sales ledgers were not often opened to public scrutiny, we shall not know for sure.

HOT AND ROCKING

Roughly six months later, the Gospel Clefs came out with 'Behind Every Dark Cloud' and 'Out Of The Fiery Furnace', from an October 1959 session date. 'Out of the furnace' was a hot, rocking number driven by three lead singers, in turn. 'Behind every dark cloud' was yet another pretty, sweet ballad sung in unison without theatrical embellishment. But this and the group's following single, 'He Made Them All' / 'Go Woman, Sin No More,' failed to sell in as large quantities. Constant travel began to wear on the group, and some members quit and had to be replaced. Joe De Loatch returned to the Back Home Choir and recorded with them on Vee Jay Records.

"Enoch Franklin opened a fender and body repair shop and made himself a fortune," says Leon. Louis Johnson moved to Washington, DC. This left Leon, Byrd and Andrews with Abe Huston filling in on some recording dates. New recruits, picked from the same sources, included Charles Barnes, Tommy Mason, Jack Blande, Philip Thomas and Harold Cavaness. The Gospel Clefs continued to make fine recordings. The best of these included the Huston and Leon-lead 'So Good,' a gospel waltz full of trademark color and grandeur, the grandiloquent 'You Can Talk To God' with its almost whispered passages and high distaff-like harmonies, and the exotic 'Stand The storm' with its Eastern atmosphere and falsetto ornaments. The group even cut an R & B record for Ozzie Cadena's Choice label in 1962.

Notable engagements during this time included an appearance on the Clara Ward Anniversary Program in Philadelphia. In 1963, Leon and the Gospel Clefs' Andrews, Blande and others were chosen to appear in a gospel stage play at The Fortune Theatre. The Gospel Clefs continued to record through 1967. By then, the group had progressed musically to a point where they felt they needed a full brass section. Robert Banks was hired to conduct and write special arrangements for their Verve album. But nothing really clicked, and the group called it quits. Joe De Loatch is now pastor of the Pentecostal Church in Newark. Robert Byrd died in the 1970s. Rev. Abe Huston passed in 1989, and the great Raymond Andrews sang his last note in 1989.

Now and again, in between teaching music at St. Philips Academy in Newark, Leon gathers old friends and ex-members together for a Gospel Clefs reunion. "It wouldn't take much to get the Gospel Clefs up and running again. I have all the sounds in my head," says Leon.