

The Story of Herbert L. 'Pee Wee' Pickard

Opal Louis Nations



Professor Herbert "Pee-Wee" Pickard

Herbert Pee Wee Pickard at the organ, 1980s.

The incredibly gifted Herbert L. "Pee Wee" Pickard, pianist, organist, songwriter, director and arranger and long-serving keyboardist for the famous Gospel Harmonettes of Alabama, embarked on a musical career when still in knee-pants. At the age of eleven he appeared at Detroit's Music Hall with the late, great Lionel Hampton. While still a teenager he toured the nation with the late Prof. Alex Bradford, Brother Joe May & the Original Gospel Harmonettes. After serving two years in the Army and two with Rev. James Cleveland and the Voices of the Tabernacle he took charge of the all-male chorus at the Greater New Mt. Moriah Baptist pastored by Rev. B.L. Hooks.

For fourteen years he directed the chorus he labeled The Mighty Voices of Thunder who were one of the largest and best known throughout the country. In the 1970s the choir cut one album for Stanford Giuhan's Arnold label entitled "Voices of Thunder" (Arnold 2464.) He served as organist for Rev. C.L. Franklin's New Bethel Radio Choir for twelve years under the direction of Prof. Thomas H. Shelby. He has also taught in the Detroit Public School system as music instructor. Pee Wee is featured on two Savoy albums on which he plays both keyboards and fronts the Pickard Singers. Pee Wee was inducted into the Gospel

Music Hall of Fame in Detroit in 2001.

Pee Wee is currently enjoying a well-deserved retirement after more than fifty years on the road with various gospel singers and musicians. "I don't miss it all" he says. "In fact I enjoy not being under the limelight and away from constant scrutiny. I only do funerals now of people I don't know," he adds, "then I don't encounter folk who recognise me and ask to make commitments like playing for them at church."

One of his recent funerals was for Grace Cobb, long-serving soloist with Hulah Jean Dunklin Hurley and the choir at Rev. Clarence Franklin's church in Detroit. Pee Wee also made a cameo appearance at the recent Gospel Music Workshop of America convention to sign autographs. "I hardly go out to church anymore. I just want to relax, be away from people and enjoy my free time." It was the car accident he had while driving impatiently just outside of Newport back in 1978 that first lead him to re-evaluate his life. "I was giving piano lessons to tobacco heiress Doris Duke and driving away from her home along the highway at eighty miles an hour when I crashed into a tree. You would think that I'd suffer multiple injuries but the only damage I sustained was a broken wrist and fingers. My hand was bent right back and it snapped. I had to wear pins and rubber bands in my wrist for a month and was told by the doctor that I'd never play piano again. I was scared half to death. It took a year to heal during which time I tried desperately to play with one hand. I wanted to play so much but couldn't. I then began to realize that there was much more to life than playing, teaching and composing music."

"He Knows It All"

A child prodigy

The fact that Pee Wee was a child prodigy and grew up in a deeply religious household narrowed his expectation of ever becoming anything other than a church musician. He was

born the second oldest of nine children in West Detroit in 1933. His father, Rev. George Pickard, pastored the local Church of God In Christ. His mother, Autra Brassville, labored for the church and played occasional piano. Only Pee Wee's oldest sister Florence showed any propensity for music. Florence, like her mother and brother, learned to play the piano when three and four years old.

Pee Wee stood at his mother's side as she religiously practiced her hymns at the keyboard. Pee Wee only had to look at his mother's fingers on the keys to remember the notes to all the songs she attempted to play. He was able to picture a keyboard in his mind and would remember all the placements of the fingers over the notes and the sounds they made. One day at practice, when his father was shaving out in the kitchen, his mother hit some wrong notes and after repeated attempts could not find the correct ones. "That's not the way to play it, mother," said Pee Wee. "Let me show you." Pee Wee sat on the stool and ran through the misplayed section, hitting all the notes correctly. His father came running from the kitchen, shaving cream all over his face, shouting "you've got it, you've got it!" only to find Pee Wee and not his wife Autra on the stool, beaming up at him.

At age eight, Pee Wee was able to "picture perfect" every note to Avery Parish's 1941 hit, *After Hours*, by just closing his eyes and seeing his own hands pass across the keys. He never would, of course, play it for real unless he was alone in the house. Whatever notes he couldn't reach by the spread of his fingers he would improvise. By now Pee Wee was giving concert recitals at church. It was here he was noticed by Charles Pennington, lead soloist with Detroit's unrecorded United Gospel Singers. Second lead Thelma Byrd also sang in the group. Byrd was noted locally for her later work with her own outfit, the Byrdettes. Pee Wee joined the group as piano accompanist.



RADIO ARTISTS

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Pee Wee Pickard at age nine with the United Gospel Sgrs of Detroit, 1942.

The United Gospel Singers programmed every Sunday morning over Detroit's WJLB, following the Flying Clouds at 9:30 a.m. sharp.

Lionel Hampton and Milt Buckner

At school, Pee Wee's music teacher found he had perfect pitch. But this was "thrown off" when he was required to take up the clarinet which has a different pitch. "I found I no longer had the ability to instantly pick up the correct key," says Pee Wee. One of Pee Wee's music teachers was a friend of Gladys Hampton, Lionel Hampton's wife. In fact, the pair were "sorority sisters." Through Gladys, Pee Wee was asked to demonstrate his abilities to Lionel who was so impressed he asked the boy to play with his band. At this point Hampton was hitting big on the charts with songs like *Flying Home* and *Hamp's Boogie Woogie*. But Pee Wee's tenure with Hampton was a brief one as the family frowned upon their son playing anything other than church music.

The most rewarding aspect to Pee Wee's brief encounter with Hampton was that he and Hampton's regular pianist, Milt Buckner, became close friends. "Milt showed me a few pointers on the piano," says Pee Wee. After leaving high school Pee Wee got into Wayne



Herbert 'Pee Wee' Pickard in the 1950s

State University and studied engineering for two years but he found engineering not as stimulating as music and quit. He was the youngest student on campus and added to the fact that he was unusually short in stature he probably encountered a certain amount of bullying.

Joining the Gospel Harmonettes

Back home in Detroit he attended Rev. C.L. Franklin's church, The New Bethel Baptist, on the corner of Linwood and Philadelphia Streets. C.L. Franklin, the father of Aretha, Irma and Caroline Franklin, not only gave pew-scorching sermons but brought traveling gospel acts to his church to perform in concert. Luminaries included Rev. James Cleveland and Prof. Alex Bradford with the Willie Webb Singers, composed of soldiers from one of Roberta Martin's groups. Pee Wee met them all and with some he performed in the accompanist capacity over the years.

The first was Prof. Bradford with whom he toured. Bradford was both friend and mentor to Pee Wee. Then came his tenure with Brother Joe May, replacing Theresa Childs for a while. It was while playing for Joe May that he was noticed by Evelyn Starks, pianist with the Gospel Harmonettes. Pee Wee was very unhappy with May and wanted very much to get the chance of playing for the Harmonettes. One day when May and Pee Wee were touring the Mid-West they by chance happened to be staying at a Chicago hotel where Bradford and his entourage were also sequestered. Pee Wee

expressed his disenchantment with May to Bradford and asked if he could help him get with the Harmonettes.

Bradford put Pee Wee with his Chicago friends while Pee Wee was still with May -- firstly Albertina Walker who needed a pianist to accompany her on her regular radio broadcast. Then Pee Wee played for Roberta Martin at the Ebenezer Baptist. When departing with May for California, Pee Wee told him he planned to join the Gospel Harmonettes when he got there. Fortunately for Pee Wee, an opening presented itself when Evelyn Starks announced that she would return to teaching in the Birmingham Public School system in the spring of 1953. Pee Wee joined the Gospel Harmonettes in time for their August 1953 session at Universal Recorders Studio in Hollywood.



Pee Wee Pickard with the Gospel Harmonettes, 1950s.

Gospel Harmonettes

The raw "country" sound of the Gospel Harmonettes first came together after World War II when pianist Evelyn Starks recruited schoolmates contralto Odessa Edwards, soprano Vera Kolb, alto Willie Mae Newbury Garth, and mezzo-soprano Mildred Miller Howard to form the Harmonettes. After a name-change to the Lee Harmonettes to fall in line with their freshly appointed lead singer,

soprano Georgia Lee Stafford, they toured the Southlands. They then traveled with Bishop Williams and one of the founding female practitioners of gospel piano, Arizona Dranes. Freeing themselves from noted soloists, they became the Original Gospel Harmonettes and recorded for Victor in June 1949.

Having been influenced by various pianists / composers around Chicago in particular, Starks developed a bluesy, sanctified style which well matched the wild, extravagant singing which was to prevail after the determinably anguished Dorothy Love Coates came aboard in 1951. Dorothy was born in Birmingham, Alabama in 1928. She had mastered the piano by age ten and was singing in the family group, the McGriff Sisters. She also sang while in the unrecorded Royal Travelers.

Dorothy, who always let the spirit move her during performance, added drama and authenticity to the group's act. A "strained" excitement often prevailed. Images of her on T.V. Gospel Time and Jubilee Showcase show us a sweat-drenched, possessed-looking figure, almost demented to a state of grace. Pee Wee cut six sessions in California with the group over a period of three years, netting approximately thirty released songs. By now he had started writing songs of his own.

The group recorded some of their best remembered and in many cases best-selling sides during this three-year period -- *No Hiding Place* (August 1953), *He's Calling Me* (September 1954), *Get Away Jordan* (March 1955) plus *99 1/2* and *That's Enough* (August 1956.) Major performance venues included Carnegie Hall in October 1953 and Harlem's famous Apollo Theatre in December 1956.

In December 1956 Pee Wee was inducted into the Army where for two years he served as an x-ray technician at the 97th Regiment's General Hospital in Frankfurt, Germany. He remembers all hell breaking loose and a general base-wide panic when Elvis Presley was taken in a jeep by a major to the Regiment's General for a complete physical evaluation. You would think the country was at war.

Military service and working for Rev. James Cleveland

Pee Wee returned to Detroit in late 1958. He

had always remained friends with Rev. James Cleveland and had often shared a pack of cards with him while out on the road with the Caravans. Cleveland sang and played piano with the famous Chicago-based Caravans during the mid-Fifties (1954-1956.) Now Cleveland was gathering some of Detroit's most talented gospel artists to showcase on Carmen Murphy's fledgling Hob (House of Beauty) label on Detroit's Mack Avenue. Cleveland picked Rev. Chas Ashley Craig's Prayer Tabernacle and Craig himself to serve as choir director. Star soloists and musicians would include Hulah Gene Dunklin Hurley, Richard Roquemore, Louise McCord, organist Alfred Bolden, pianist Pee Wee Pickard plus a choral ensemble labeled The Voices of the Tabernacle Choir. The organization gave Cleveland a vehicle to express all those ideas he had noted down over the apprenticeship years of his life with the Gospelaire Trio, Gospel All Stars, Caravans and Meditations. Wanting to experiment with standard forms of choral arrangement, Cleveland seized the opportunity to work with a choir all his own. Cleveland took choral singing and added soloists and small choruses that would meld both fervor and added interest to the overall performance. Indeed his first experiment, the release of *The Love Of God*, proved that choral discipline, secular crooning and unusual time signatures can broadly popularize church music. *The Love Of God* became a major seller and every church with a choir worth its salt started to adopt Cleveland's formula.

This is not to say that Cleveland abandoned small background or vocal group ensembles but continued on recording and arranging for them for many years to come. Pee Wee's piano accompaniment on *The Love Of God* brought unexpected accolades from the gospel community. Cleveland's Detroit renaissance flowered for almost two years during which time (with Pee Wee's musical talents) Cleveland recorded at least six albums supported not only by the aforementioned musicians but by Sallie Martin, Jessy Dixon and the Gospel Chimes, his old friends the Meditation Singers of Detroit with Laura Lee plus a female trio he created to showcase his own singing called the Gospel All Stars, in

memory of his old like-named Chicago group of 1953.



Herbert 'Pee Wee' Pickard at the organ, 1950s.

By May 1960, Cleveland had relocated to New Jersey and was under contract with Herman Lubinsky at Savoy Records on Ferry Street in Newark. Under arrangement, Carmen Murphy continued to release Cleveland's HOB album material in various configurations during the Sixties. When Cleveland moved from Detroit to New Jersey he replaced Pee Wee with Billy Preston who appeared on at least half a dozen of his Angelic Choir collections.

Returning to Gospel Harmonettes

Meanwhile, apart from performing occasionally

with noted organist Alfred Bolden whom Pee Wee describes as a small, jolly, personable fellow, he returned to the Gospel Harmonettes. "Bolden," says Pee Wee, "and I had a spiritual vibe going when we played together. We both sensed what each of us would play. Consequently we made beautiful music together." Sadly, Bolden died at a very young age after leaving the Army in early 1958. Dorothy Love Coates and the Harmonettes were extremely disappointed and as Pee Wee himself states, broken hearted, by the fact that Pee Wee opted to go with Cleveland as opposed to returning to the Harmonettes. But in early 1964 Dorothy and the girls were overjoyed when he offered to resume his services, at least for a short while. Johnny Gaines, who had become the group's permanent Pee Wee replacement during his absence, was kept on as pianist and Pee Wee moved over to the organist's stool. Pee Wee played on one, perhaps two, of the Gospel Harmonettes' albums on the Chicago-based Vee Jay imprint. But things had changed. The Gospel Harmonettes, although extremely popular throughout the nation, were not traveling as much or making as many professional commitments to the music as in the past. Full-time gospel singing had become impractical to all those, except the most visible star acts and diehards. Choirs, with the aid of Cleveland, Rev. Milton Brunson and others, were beginning to gain more air-time and popularity with church-going folk compared to

those small bands of dedicated gospel troubadours trying to scrape a living out on the rough and rocky gospel highway. With this in mind, Pee Wee acquired an engineering job at the Ford Motor Company. He stayed for a decade, then quit to teach piano.



Gospel Harmonettes, Paramounts, Bradford Singers and Herbert 'Pee Wee' Pickard.

Pee Wee continued to write songs, the most notable of which included *God Never Fails*, recorded in recent years by Rev. Clay Evans, and *Give God A Chance*, a chart adapted and waxed by Rev. W. Lee Daniels and others. His best remembered composition is *Jesus Knows It All*, a.k.a. *He Knows It All*, a song he wrote for the Gospel Harmonettes who recorded it with him for Specialty Records in September 1954.

The Harmonettes disbanded in 1971, with Dorothy going on to make records in her own right, supported by singers expressly gathered for the recording. She was inducted into Detroit's Gospel Music Hall of Fame on West McNichols on Friday, October 10, 1997. She died of heart failure at the Birmingham

General Hospital at the age of seventy-four on Tuesday, April 9, 2002.

Up until the late 1990s Pee Wee was still actively engaged in music, writing songs and playing occasionally for his church. Since then he has suffered from respiratory problems and can only play for a few minutes without resorting to a portable supply of oxygen. Because of this he will only perform in his parlor where his audience would be made up of

a select number of invited guests. He also has a tendency to shy away from large, appreciative crowds, preferring only to come out and play for his church at select times.