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Hightower Brothers Gospel Singers

"The Best Of"

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Original album cover courtesy of Bob Perry



"The Best Of The" HIGHTOWER BROTHERS



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The Hightower Brothers

The Hightower Brothers are an enigma. Over the short, seven year span of the quintet's existence, the brothers both "upset" churches and drew the utmost respect from major religious touring acts with whom they shared billing up and down the gospel highway. To witness the young siblings in action during the late Fifties was a miracle to behold. They simply rode on a windstorm. It was as if The Five Blind Boys of Mississippi together with legendary lead Archie Brownlee had founded a junior, sighted edition of themselves in order to lengthen a tradition as indeed The Hightower Brothers gleaned much inspiration from the boys of Piney Woods. Yet, in spite of this, The Hightower Brothers are mentioned today by major black gospel aficionados across the globe merely in passing reference. This writer remains puzzled and is at a loss to know why this major quartet continues to slip notice. The CD you hold in your hand is an amazing collection of sanctified gospel and will surely do much to set the record straight.

The Hightower family hailed from Deland, Florida about twenty-five miles west of Daytona Beach. The group was composed of the father, Reverend Nick Hightower, and adolescent sons, Robert Lee "Little Sugar," lead, Willie James, second tenor, William Martin, bass, Reco, guitar, and Johnny, tenor who also served as arranger and assistant business manager for the outfit. Under the close supervision, guidance, and training of their father, a holiness preacher, the lads played local engagements and sang for several years at the Christ Holiness Church at which their grandfather was a bishop. The family relocated to Newark, New

Jersey some time during the mid-fifties. In 1957, the kids appeared on amateur night at the famous Apollo Theatre in Harlem and drew much attention. Kiddie-group acts like The Schoolboys, Teenagers, Teen Chords, and North Philadelphia Juniors were a big thing at the time. During the summer of 1958, the boys were brought to the attention of Herman Lubinsky, president of the Savoy Records conglomerate out of New Jersey. Cashbox for October 1958 mentioned that The Hightower Brothers, a spiritual quartet ranging in age from nine to eighteen years old, had been signed to Lubinsky's short-lived Gospel subsidiary label. On October 13, the boys cut five songs at Lubinsky's New York Studio under the Reverend Nick's usual guidance and piano accompaniment. Four songs on two singles were issued. One of these, "At the golden gate," builds to such tension, the record almost jumps off the turntable during play, yet few heads were turned by the release.

December 1959 saw The Hightower Brothers signed with Nashboro Records in Nashville where, over the course of three years, they enjoyed the release of seven singles and one album. This CD brings the group's total work for Nashboro together for the first time and includes ten unissued songs plus three previously unissued alternates. The group's initial Nashboro release was "Finally made it in" backed with "Oh Lord save me." "Finally made it in" finds "Little Sugar" blazing at full lung-busting capacity. His intense delivery pushes the group to its physical limits. "Oh Lord save me" has the customary Hightower ballad imprint, cool wailing harmonies, and ragged, anguished lead vocals propel it along.

Reverend Nick demonstrates his piano ability on the mid-tempo romper "Lord help me to

stand" fronted by Willie James. The jubilant "My Jesus loves me" was issued also on the group's only album release of 1960. "Lord, take me through" opens with a prayer and continues on at a laid back pace with "Little Sugar" riding over the top like an enraptured baptist preacher three times his age. The tambourine-driven issued version of "Jesus is my only friend" keeps to the standard arrangement and does not evolve into manic extroversion. However, the two alternate versions included here suggest improved combustion.

"Ain't gonna be this way" is another rug-warmer whereon William Martin blow-cheeks the bass line with admirable effect. "God has been good" is another spine-tingler. "Little Sugar" piles on the emotion and the group wails in perfect Sensational Nightingales-like manner. However, this fine waxing is far too short and allows no time for the song to get off the ground. "To the end" is a Hightower classic and should have propelled the group to stardom. "Little Sugar's" lead is at peak condition and the harmonies polished to perfection. As usual, the rendition is too short, and therefore the group is prevented from taking the song to higher heavenly places.

"Until He comes" is another holiness dance vehicle. "Saved by the blood of Jesus," a soul-drenched gospel-ballad is given the saved and sanctified treatment expected of the group. "Little Sugar" squeezes every last drop of anguish out of the melody. The traditional "This little light of mine" gets the muscles working but fades before maximum delight. Impetus reaches inflamed excitement on "It's glory glory," a punchy, rhythmic vehicle done with zeal.

"Seat in the Kingdom" is perhaps the group's best remembered song and deservedly so.

The harmonies gel and "Little Sugar's" hard-edged pipes give it a glorious roughness only heard on the finest gospel recordings from that era. The title track of The Hightowers' Nashboro album was "I need you Lord" (better known as "Come by here.") The track is included here in all its fire and fury. "Lord spare me" is another gut-bucket burden lifter punctuated with "Little Sugar's" squeals and squalls. The Hightowers at their best.

"Lord's been good to me." stays within a traditional framework and is not given Hightower extroversion, but "Jesus, I love you" escapes the usual mold and comes across as a truly righteous performance. "Jesus will fix it" sets us down in a gospel jam-session. "You got to pay" is another scorcher and just burns with emotive excitement. The absolute joy of The Hightower Brothers is experienced when the group is allowed to break from tradition, and on the ballads in particular, stretch out and reach down to the depths of the soul. This is made manifest on a handful of previously unissued cuts beginning with two run-throughs of "Angels watch over me," plus "Where could I go," and a stunning rendition of "Lord I'll go" ("I'm going through") which surely peaks anything recorded before or since. Also included is a warm and disciplined reading of "Pass me not o gentle Savior."

Other hitherto unheard manifestations include "Alone with the Lord," a call and response rocker that concludes with a fine guitar outro by Reco Hightower. "Lord I'm running" ("99 1/2 won't do") jumps along to a rhythm and blues riff and allows for some out of the ordinary accompaniment from both Nick and Reco. "He's a warrior" ("battleaxe") raises our spirits but with "It's my desire" one can sense the impending changes in the group. The first version

stays for the most part within gospel boundaries but the harmonies on the second reading definitely transport us to a secular world.

"Little Sugar" warbles in Sam Cooke fashion as the group tries to sound like the Hi-Lo's. Memories of The Sensational Nightingales are again evoked on "It must have been the Lord" ("Somebody touched me,") yet another gem kept too long in the can. The set ends out with an all-out reading of "What a friend we have in Jesus," purposefully more intense than all those versions that had gone before.

The group spent much of its time touring the Eastern seaboard from Canada through the Carolinas into Florida and old home turf. The Hightower Brothers and Nashboro parted company midway through 1963 when the group signed with Don Robey's Peacock label out of Houston, Texas. Peacock's first release, "Child of the King," sung with the usual fiery gusto, created enough sales to generate a second release, "Nobody's fault but mine" which did not do so well, although every bit as exuberant and exciting as the former offering.

Some time during the spring of 1964 there came about a parting of the ways. The group, now teens or beyond, wanted to forge their own way in the world and make some "real" money. They had grown tired of living hand to mouth, and daddy's rigid ways kept them from ever stepping beyond the life of the church. The Hightower Brothers decided to turn from religion. Changing their name to Little Mr. Lee & The Cherokees, they tried their hand at funky soul music. Of course, a little persuasion from Don Robey helped matters along a bit.)

The Reverend Nick Hightower became a solo act and billing himself as Elder Hightower rejoined Herman Lubinsky's Savoy label in 1965. With Sister Massey, Elder Hightower cut two albums for Savoy during 1966 and 1967. On he second, he abandoned his seat at the piano and took up the harmonica. Elder Hightower retired from music in 1968.

During all this, Don Robey put out three singles by The Mad Lads-sounding Little Mr. Lee & The Cherokees on his Sure Shot subsidiary over a period of little more than a year. The first of these, "Will my baby come back?," generated healthy sales but bad deals and changing times caused The Cherokees' demise around the close of the Hippie era. "Little Sugar" returned to gospel as non-singing guitar accompanist, first with The Mighty Clouds of Joy out of Los Angeles and then as member of Howard Hunt's North Carolina-based Supreme Angels with whom he performs to this day.

— Opal L. Nations
January 1995



Photo courtesy of Ray Funk