

# THE JEWELL GOSPEL SINGERS

By Opal Louis Nations

The Jewell Gospel Singers, or Jewel Gospel Trio, the group into which they later evolved, was one of gospel music's truly pioneering aggregations of the Post-War era. "We were one of the first female singing groups to perform with a full rhythm section" recalls Maggie Staton. "We were a revolutionary act back then,

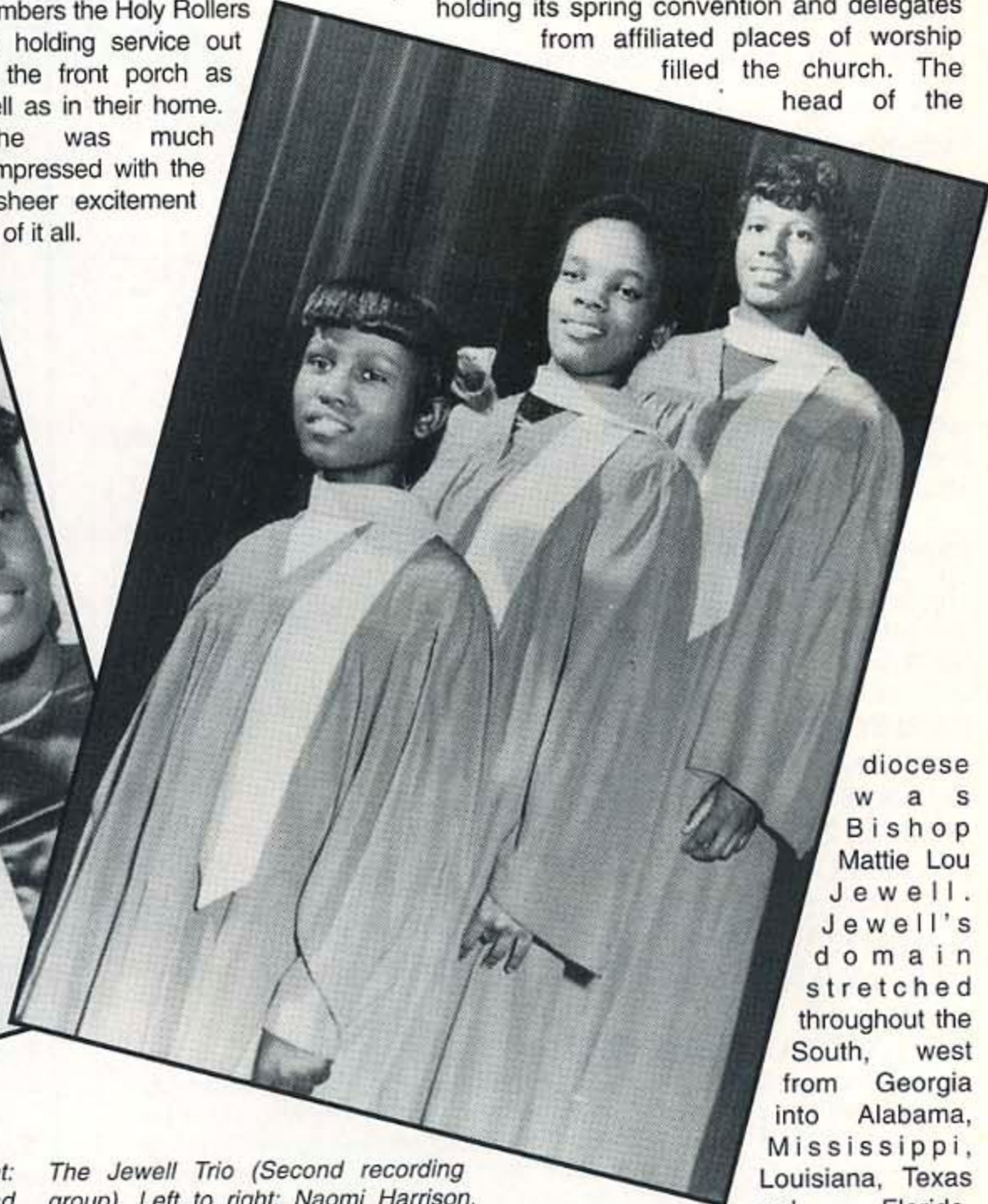
Staton and wife Rosie Sims laboured as dirt farmers during the summer months, harvesting crops and picking cotton and worked in the coal mines over winter to make ends meet. The Statons were poor, God-fearing Baptist folk, struggling to raise six offspring: Sam, Joseph, Lillie, Robert Earl, Canzetta (Candi) and Maggie. Canzetta remembers the Holy Rollers sect holding service out on the front porch as well as in their home. She was much impressed with the sheer excitement of it all.

Ethel took an interest in the girls' singing abilities and thought they showed promise. Canzetta and Maggie auditioned for the Arthur Godfrey 'Talent Scouts' T.V. show but were rejected. Not being in the least bit disheartened by this, Ethel took the girls to the Pentecostal Church Of The Living God in downtown Cleveland. The church was holding its spring convention and delegates from affiliated places of worship filled the church. The

head of the



The Original Jewell Trio. Left to Right: Candi Staton, Maggie Staton and Naomi Harrison. Courtesy Opal Louis Nations



The Jewell Trio (Second recording group). Left to right: Naomi Harrison, Shirley Boyd and Sederia Boles. Courtesy Opal Louis Nations

when bands were not accepted by most main line churches. We featured a lap steel guitar long before Clara

Ward got Sammy Fain into her group." In the early fifties, especially in blues and rhythm music, the lap steel guitar was considered the sound of things to come. Buddy Lucas featured a steel player in his all star combo, billed as 'the newest sound on wax'.

The roots of The Jewells are embedded in the once tiny farming community of Hanceville in Cullman County, Alabama. Hanceville sits off Highway 31, midway between Hunstville to the north and Birmingham to the south, smack dab in the middle of The Bible Belt. Alabamans Earsie

Canzetta and Maggie were the only members of the family to show any signs of musical propensity. As children growing up during the post-war period, Canzetta and Maggie sang around the house in tune with their favourite gospel singers blasting from the family radio. Mahalia Jackson and The Clara Ward Singers were particular favourites. Canzetta states she also sang in the local baptist church choir and fired up the congregation. By 1951, Earsie's drinking problem had led to family abuse. Gathering up her family, Rosie moved to Cleveland to live with her oldest son, Sam, and his wife, Ethel.

Canzetta and Maggie's names were added to the singing programme at the convention. The time came for the girls to sing, and, choosing two of their Mahalia Jackson favourites, 'Move On Up A Little Higher' and 'Get Away Jordan', they took the delegation by storm.

Bishop Jewell was much impressed and wanted the sisters to come with her to Nashville where she ran a bible school called, appropriately enough, The Jewell Academy and Seminary. The girls would both sing to raise money for the school and be pupils at the same time. Their mother Rosie later reluctantly agreed to the scheme. In Nashville the sisters were joined with the Bishop's great granddaughter, Naomi Harrison, the daughter

diocese was Bishop Mattie Lou Jewell. Jewell's domain stretched throughout the South, west from Georgia into Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas and Florida.



of Lorenzo and Nettie Mae Harrison. Nettie Mae played piano for the gals and helped out with the voice coaching. The sisters practised and practised, and hated it. They felt they would never play in public.

As Bishop Jewell was both sponsor and mentor, the girls quite naturally called themselves the Jewell Gospel Singers. The group built a repertoire, and unlike other gospel acts, experimented with backing music. The Bishop had the girls dressed up all prim and proper, recalls Canzetta, in pinafore dresses and patent leather shoes. The Jewells added musical accompaniment: Harvey Jones, guitar, Corneva Burns, drums, and Naomi's brother, Lorenzo Jr., played bass and lap steel guitar. Rolma Jones or Nettie Harrison filled in on piano. The group developed a thrilling yet soulful sound, unique for its time, all three soloists switching all three parts, soprano, contralto and alto. The trio travelled with The Davis Sisters, who were apprehensive about the gals' survival at first, but when they saw that the audiences loved their singing, they soon came round.

The Jewell Gospel Singers spent the summer of 1953 vacationing in Southern California and in August, the group did the rounds of the record companies and ended up auditioning for the Mesner brothers and Aladdin Records. A recording date was set at Hollywood's Radio Recorders on August 25. "We sure did audition at Aladdin records" says Maggie, "but they only put four out". Issued both on Aladdin in December 1953 and later on the company's Score subsidiary in July 1954, the group came out with 'At The Cross', 'Rest, Rest, Rest' and 'I Shall Know Him'. The last two titles featured Maggie on lead, plus a fourth song, 'Over There'. Little is known about the session except that 'At The Cross' took six takes to get right.

Nothing much happened with the records and the girls came home. Bishop Jewell had the group tour constantly throughout her diocese, appearing not only on church programmes, but at ball parks and auditoriums, including the Ryman in Nashville. In Florida, the gals stayed at the home of the great Mary McLeod Bethune, founder of the Bethune-Cookman College and changed their name to The Jewell Gospel Trio for a while. This lasted until the threesome had grown to a fivesome with the addition of the late Sederia Boles and Shirley Boyd. The troupe was constantly reinventing their sound to keep in step with the changing of the times.

Further travel took the group to ten states, including a trip to the Bahamas, and they played the Opera House in Philadelphia, sharing the billing with the great Paul Robeson. In February 1955, the Jewells (changed from Jewells) signed a three year contract with Ernie Young of Nashboro Records. Both sides of their initial release, 'Take My Hand, Precious Lord' and 'Many Little Angels In The Band', were spearheaded by newcomers Boles and Boyd.

'Take My Hand' is given a fine blues-coloured reading, pretty guitar fills and mannered piano triplets underscore Shirley's full throated lead. The jazzy 'Many Little Angels' is for the most part a group effort, although Sederia comes to the fore on the final chorus. This number is also Maggie's particular favourite and one which is requested most often.

Two months after the quintet's second release, 'I Look Down The Line', fronted by Boles, coupled with Naomi Harrison's leadership on 'Somebody Knocking At Your Door', the Jewel Gospel Singers played the 7,000 seat, packed to the gills, Columbia Coliseum in South Carolina, alongside the Soul Stirrers, Swan Silvertones and Swanee Quintet. The girls toured the Philippines. The brazen Canzetta adopted the stage routines of their male counterparts and jumped into the aisles to work up the crowds.



Bishop Mattie Lou Jewell. Chief overseer of The Church Of The Living God. Benefactor for The Jewell Gospel Singers. Photo courtesy Opal Louis Nations.

'Jesus Is Listening', paired with 'The Gospel Ship', constituted the group's third single release and finds Canzetta singing at full throttle. A solid church-stomping beat supports Canzetta's long, impressive, sustained, and melismatic embellishments. 'The Gospel Ship', at times led by by Naomi Harrison, has a secular ring to it, Good, close, five part harmonies are shown to the fullest advantage. 'Praying Time' and Canzetta's stunning lead warblings on 'Sin Is To Blame' were released in May 1957.

On Sunday, June 30, that same year, the Jewel Gospel Singers played the Apollo Theater, on a star-studded bill that included Prof. Herman Stevens, The Sensational Nightingales, The Spirituales and The

Famous Skylights. The package was put together by Thurman Ruth, the legendary lead singer of The Selah Jubilee Singers and Southern Harmonaires, who backed Mahalia Jackson on record in 1952. Not long after this Apollo appearance, Canzetta was advised by Sam Cooke to cross over into secular music. She was at that point more than unhappy with the less than fair business deals and the fact that the Bishop rarely paid the group for their services. "We never had money to buy new clothes", complained Canzetta. Rosie was against the idea of letting her daughter sing 'the devil's music' but Canzetta was determined to have her own way just as soon as she came of age.

Not long after the group's fifth and final Nashboro release, in May, 1958, Canzetta's glorious lead vocals on 'Too Late', a widely selling Argo Gospel Singers-sounding chart, backed with Sederia's bluesy lead on 'Ease My Troublin', Maggie and Canzetta finished up studies at The Jewell Academy. Maggie applied for and was awarded a place at Tennessee State University where she studied and majored in psychology. After college, Maggie taught school for 25 years. Sandwiched between, in 1987, Maggie cut three self-produced album length cassette collections, 'First Fruits', 'This Soul Of Mine' and 'Born Again'. She also has a concept video entitled 'Born Again' on the Winston Derek label.

Bishop Mattie Lou Jewell passed away in 1992. Naomi Harrison, now known as Bishop Naomi Manning, took on the overseer's job at the late bishop's church, The Pentecostal Church Of The Living God, headquartered in Indianapolis. Naomi's mother, Nettie Mae Harrison, currently assists her daughter in her work when health permits. She made her home in Los Angeles..

Canzetta was offered a scholarship at Tennessee State but got pregnant and married the baby's father instead. She played organ and piano at a church in Birmingham and had three more children. Her husband turned out to be a possessive man and after her minister made unexpected sexual innuendoes, she decided to quit the church altogether. Canzetta, now Candi Staton, first cut a single about racial issues with Billy Walker, called 'You Can't Judge A Man By The Color Of His Skin'. Alas, the single failed to gain

notice, but her break came when her brother dared her to sing Aretha Franklin's 'Do Right Woman' at The 27/28 Club in Birmingham. She won a booking to open for Clarence Carter, who introduced her to the record company he was pacted with, the Fame label in Florence, Alabama.

Fame producer Rick Hall caught an earful of Candi's raspy, infectious pipes, instantly signed her up and she became an immediate success. Carter later married Candi and she gave birth to a fifth child. For more on the life of soul, disco and gospel superstar Candi Staton, see Bill Carpenter's excellent article in Goldmine, March 17, 1995 and Lee Hildebrand's accurate monograph in 'Stars Of Soul And R&B' (Billboard Books, 1994)