

LOUIS MADISON *The Fleeting Famous Flame*

By OPAL LOUIS NATIONS



Bay-Tone label owner Brad Taylor with The Fabulous Flames (L to R): Louis Madison, J.W. Archer, Willie 'Snake' Johnson and Bill Hollings.

Louis Madison's most significant contribution to the pain-stained anthems of soul music is his claim to have written and arranged the piano, the words and melodies to 'Maybe The Last Time' (ascribed to Ted Wright), 'Please, Please, Please' (label-credited to James Brown and Johnny Terry) plus, among others, 'Try Me' and 'I Feel Good', supposedly penned, as printed on record, by The Godfather himself. "I sold them to James for \$5,000", says Madison, "with money he borrowed from rich friends".

It is hard to believe that in 1955 any "sugar daddy" would have fronted that much money to James Brown (who had recently served time for burglary) for a handful of rough drafted musical arrangements, but be that as it may. In a telephone conversation with Bobby Byrd (long time Brown associate / baritone singer and pianist with The Famous Flames), Byrd told me that Madison and Brown sat around the piano and worked on the basics of the songs.

Madison told me that he met James Brown at a service club in Savannah, Georgia in 1954. He had just received his discharge from the Army and Army Special Services had kept Madison employed as a service club pianist and singer. He sang and played rhythm and blues in the style of the day. James Brown was much impressed by Madison and his music, but little evidence shows that they became constant friends at that point in time. After service commitments, Madison played a set of one-nighters with Little Richard's mentor, Billy Wright, and Nashville native Larry Bird-song. He also was taken by gospel quartets like The Swan Silvertones and The Pilgrim

Travellers. Later on, he played a couple of one-nighters behind Sam Cooke, but that is jumping ahead a ways.

Madison was born in Sandersville, Washington County, Georgia on May 19th 1932. His mother played piano for the Springfield Baptist Church and was a great inspiration to him. Siblings included three brothers and one sister, Annie Elizabeth, who also played piano in church. It was Annie Elizabeth who first taught young Louis the way around the ivories. Mr. West, Madison's high school piano teacher, never failed to give his student a lot of encouragement.

Madison served in the Army between 1950 and 1954, during which time a Sergeant Stracker continued to teach him a few popular piano stylings. During 1955, in Milledgeville, Georgia, Madison met up with Little Richard through his alto player, Hamp Swain, who secured Madison an audition as piano player in Richard's band. Having passed the test and accepted the job, Madison was also asked

to sing in a group called the Dominions. Founded by Henry Nash,

The Dominions idolized The Dominoes and warbled many of their songs. Little Richard, his band The Upsetters and The Dominions toured together under the management of Two Spot night club owner, Clint Brantley. They traversed the Southern states and Midwest, packaged as the Blues Express.

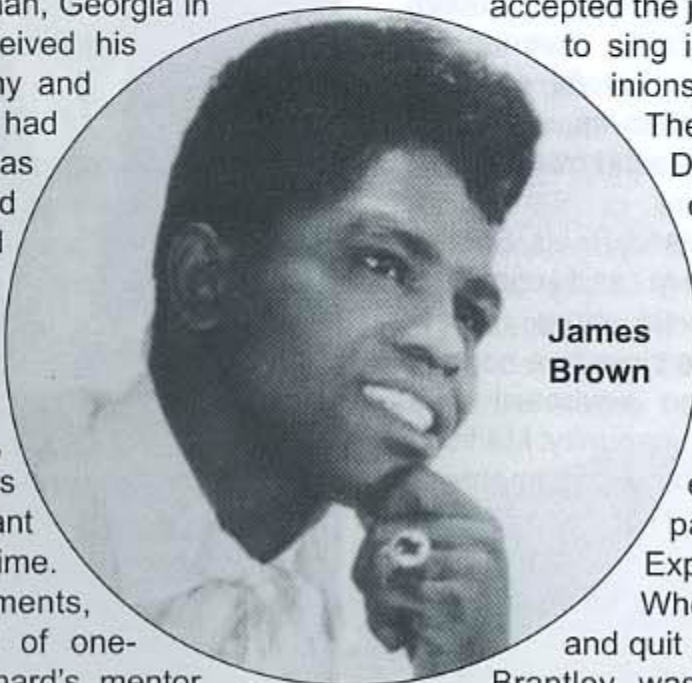
When Little Richard got religion and quit showbusiness in 1957, Clint Brantley was hard pressed to find a suitable replacement. Through bandleader Lucas 'Fats' Gonder, James Brown met up with Brantley and, not wanting to lose out financially

on failing to fill Richard's appearance dates, Brantley sent Brown out with the Blues Express as 'the powdered one' himself. Lifelong friend Bobby Byrd meanwhile filled Famous Flames engagements.

A short while after Little Richard's seemingly permanent 'retirement' from rock n roll, Brown took on The Dominions as his new set of Famous Flames. The group at this time was comprised of Bill Hollings, Louis Madison and J.W. Archer. The history of The Famous Flames dates back to 1952. Out of juvenile detention and on parole, James Brown settled in Toccoa, Georgia and, having met up with pianist / singer Bobby Byrd, he joined Byrd's gospel quartet, The Gospel Starlighters, whose repertoire was inspired by The Royal Sons (The '5' Royales) and The Swanee Quartet of Augusta Georgia. The Gospel Starlighters evolved into a rhythm and blues outfit at first known as The Avons, then later as The Flames. Original members included Sylvester Keels, Nash 'Haspendle' Knox, Fred Pullium, Nafloyd Scott (vocals and guitar) and Bobby Byrd (lead singer and pianist).

By February 1956 and the waxing of 'Please, Please, Please', Johnny Terry, one of Brown's intimate buddies, had replaced Fred Pallium and the group had become The Famous Flames. Brown considered the 1957 Bill Hollings, Louis Madison and J.W. Archer set of Famous Flames his best singing group. Session sheets indicate that Terry, Madison, Hollings and Archer sat in as Famous Flames on the October 21st 1957 session which gave us 'That Dood It', 'Baby Cries Over The Ocean', 'Begging, Begging' and 'That's When I Lost My Heart'. But nothing ignited or sold in significant numbers.

As with many touring and recording outfits, The Famous Flames' line-up in the studio could differ from the set out on the road; illness or family commitments being just a couple of



James Brown

reasons for this. Some discographies assert that Terry, Madison, Hollings and Archer were present on the hit-making 'Try Me' session of September 18th 1958, the 'I Want You So Bad' December 18th 1958 date and the 'Bewildered' January 30th 1959 session. Personnel logs indicate that by the time the June 27th 1959 'Good, Good Lovin' date came around, The Famous Flames studio group was made up of Brown's valet, 'Baby' Lloyd Stallworth, Bill Hollings and the freshly returned Bobby Byrd. It is my contention that the 'Try Me', 'I Want You So Bad' and 'Bewildered' sessions were attended by Bill Hollings, Johnny Terry and 'Baby' Lloyd Stallworth. Only Hollings' and Terry's actual names appear on the session sheets while Stallworth's name is indicated as being "one other".

The absence of Stallworth's name is because, in 1958, he could not have been older than 16 or 17 and this would have disqualified him from signing a contract. 18 years was the minimum age. Madison asserts that he was present at the 'Try Me' session. I think he may have taken the song to the public but did not actually become part of the recording group. His name certainly does not appear on the session sheets. Unfortunately, Stallworth passed away in November 2002, making it impossible for me to verify his presence on the contended three sessions.

Madison and (ex-Dominion) Famous Flames stuck with the James Brown road show into 1959, at which time Brown's finances reached an all-time low. After gigs in San Francisco, Brown's relationship with The Famous Flames hit the skids. During a confrontation out on a rain-soaked street, Bill Hollings demanded that the group be paid the money that was owed to them. Brown refused to pay up and was pushed onto the wet sidewalk. In a fit of fury, Brown sacked the group, resulting in Madison, Hollings



BAY TONE RECORDS
Recording Artists

THE FABULOUS FLAMES

personal management
B. Taylor
1509 Fillmore Street
San Francisco, Calif.

touting the same label number. Both versions are gospel-spirited waxings that really set the soul on fire. Taylor wasted little time and released 'Lover' coupled with the soulfully pleasing 'I'm So All Alone'. All three records sold well locally and have since become prized collectors items.

Meanwhile, James Brown returned to Bobby Byrd and 'Baby' Lloyd Stallworth. Bill Hollings was replaced by Bobby Bennett. Old pal Johnny Terry popped in and out of the group now and again. This set of Flames was quite possibly the group who masqueraded as The 5 Speeds who recorded for Wigie and who also waxed for Bob Bertram's International label as The Flames. Unfortunately, Madison's Flames found it difficult to survive as a vocal group in the San Francisco Bay Area at a time when musical tastes were changing rapidly. The beating to death of J.W. Archer lead to the group's demise.

Madison then formed a threesome called The Louis Madison Trio, providing backing for Paula Lamont's two singles and Miss Elsie Smith's one outing on San Francisco's Loadstone label. Madison continued to play in public even though he suffered from disorientation and loss of memory. In 1996, James Brown, who had always maintained an affectionate friendship with Madison, invited him back to his band. Madison refused and sank into even greater depths of depression. He eventually ended up frail and penniless at the Center For Elders Independence on San Pablo Avenue in Oakland. Under C.E.I.'s non-profit comprehensive health care programme, Madison received both mental and physical treatment at its rehabilitation unit.

With the help of the Oakland Blues Society who offered encouragement and continual support, Madison improved from barely functional to being able to live close to a normal, everyday life. Back at the keyboard with members of the local blues community, Madison has played and will be playing engagements at the A.C. Club, Eli's Mile High and Sweet Jimmy's in the near future. His vocal and musical skills have returned and full recovery is expected.

An interesting turn of events came about on Thursday, October 30th when local tabloids announced that Bobby Byrd had filed a lawsuit against James Brown, claiming Brown owed

him royalties for songs, including the contested 'Please, Please, Please' which he now asserts was written, in part, by all of the original Flames, each submitting one verse. I cannot help but think that my conversation with Bobby Byrd started all this, that I had made him stop and think about his role in the Brown organization and, drawing conclusions, he convinced himself that he was shafted on composer credits. It is going to be interesting indeed to see how all this will eventually turn out.

With thanks to Louis Madison, Bobby Byrd, Ken Schwartz, Jean Banks, Alec Paleo, Lee Hildebrand, Dennis Leonis, George Livingston Jnr. and Jaguardog.



C.A. Carr, Louis Madison and James Brown, July 1992. (Photo courtesy of East Bay Express)

and Archer being left stranded without money or work. Other sources tell a different but similar tale. While staying at a San Francisco hotel in adjoining rooms, Brown swiftly skipped out with all the take, leaving the group stranded.

Hearing of the outfit's plight, Brad Taylor, talent representative and owner of Bay-Tone Records in San Francisco, came to the rescue. Taking The Famous Flames under his wing and representing their interests, Taylor found work for the group, now billed as The Fabulous Flames, at clubs like the Sportsman run by Don Barksdale. In 1960, with the addition of Willie 'Snake' Johnson to the group, Taylor issued the first of three wonderful Fabulous Flames releases led vocally by Louis Madison. The first was the tearfully wailed ballad 'Do You Remember', recorded under Bob Geddins' supervision at his Big Town, Oakland studio. 'Do You Remember' is perhaps the finest vocal group recording issued in the Bay Area that year.

Almost instantly a second Brad Taylor-supervised version of the song was released,



Louis Madison, October 2003.