

**“I Heard the Angels Singing”:  
Electrifying Black Gospel from the Nashboro Label, 1951-1983**

**Liner Notes by Opal Louis Nations**

**Tompkins Square TSQ 2981 (2013)**

Nashville's Nashboro / Excello recording enterprise rose to become one of the nation's most successful independent purveyors of Gospel, Blues and R&B during the forty Post-war years of its lifespan. Its only major competition in the gospel field came from Peacock Records in Houston, Savoy in Newark and Chess in Chicago. Like the aforementioned, Nashboro held its own in principal markets – the North-East, South-Eastern Seaboard and the Deep South. What made it easier for Nashboro to compete was that the Nashboro retail store and mail order company also marketed the product of its competitors. This put them into “special deals” status.

The company built international recognition for a dozen or so groups and soloists such as the Radio Four, Consolers, Swanee Quintet, Supreme Angels, Mdm Edna Gallmon Cooke, Angelic Gospel Singers, Bro. Joe May, Gospel Keynotes, Pilgrim Jubilees, Fairfield Four, Five Singing Stars and the Gospel Harmonettes. On this collection the aforementioned are featured alongside many of equal talent but who experienced less commercial success.

Nashboro / Excello was founded by Ernest L. Young who entered the music business late in life, after World War II. He started in the jukebox operating field and soon became the largest purveyor around Nashville. Wanting to find a retail outlet for the used recordings he had supplied for his jukeboxes, he opened Ernie's Record Mart at 179 Third Avenue North. Seeing the advantages in making his own product, he built a makeshift studio in back of his store. Having little money at first, he operated all his recording equipment himself adopting basic single track mono, after the store closed at night. Later on he had a studio built on the third floor above the shipping department which served his new mail ordering division. He launched Nashboro Records in June 1951 and the Excello subsidiary in August the following year. Early Nashboro releases were mainly gospel with smatterings of hillbilly sides. Many were recorded at WLAC. Excello was introduced as a “spillover” gospel imprint but Young switched to blues / R&B in 1955 after hooking up with dealer / producer Jay Miller in Crowley, La.

The Ryman Auditorium (home of the Grand Ole Opry) began as a spiritual venue and engaged gospel musicians to play on programs presented by Rev. McCrary of the Fairfield Four and Rev. Dr. Morgan Babb of the Radio Four. Babb also deejayed gospel programs from the front window booth of Ernie's Record Mart before moving on to WMDB. The pair promoted Nashboro gospel artists as did Rev. Hoag at Mt. Calvary Baptist and the War Memorial Building on Fifth Avenue. Large Nashboro-related gospel concerts were also organized at McCrary's St. Mark's Missionary Baptist.

In the beginning Young competed with Bullet and Republic but it was not long before the best of their gospel artists moved over to Nashboro. Dr. Babb also became Young's first gospel music talent scout. Three significant radio-jocks ruled Nashville's gospel and blues airwaves from the powerful 50,000 watt studio of WLAC near Music Row. All three launched Nashboro product. Bill “Hoss” Allen from Gallatin, whose captive Southern drawl drew much business, John R. who tirelessly plugged Nashboro releases on his Ernie's Record Mart-sponsored programs and Gene Nobles who (although sponsored by the opposition) would not avoid pushing Nashboro output now and again. Excello artist Bro. (Rev.) Henry Edwards also plugged Nashboro recordings on Sunday mornings over WVOL. Working as a cook at the Andrew Jackson Hotel, Edwards helped find food and lodging for visiting gospel talent in the community.

Shannon Williams, who joined Nashboro in 1960, replacing Ted Adams, did much to build the Nashboro company. Working in the retail store at first, he developed into one of the nation's finest gospel producers and A&R men. He eventually became vice president and took over most of Young's chores after Young' sold out to the Crescent Company in 1966. Young received \$250,000 cash for all the separate businesses plus the actual building itself.

Nashboro artists were interested in just two things – WLAC exposure and records to sell at concerts because very few received songwriting or record sales royalties. The Consolers were an exception as Sullivan Pugh wrote all the duo's songs and insisted on getting credit for them. Soon after the Crescent purchase the property (building) was sold to the Life and Casualty Insurance Company (owners of Radio WLAC) who demolished the structure and built a parking lot. Shannon Williams resurrected the Nashboro Record Company and took it to 1011 Woodland Street, home of the Woodland

Sound Studios. The Creed subsidiary was soon set up. Under Shannon's leadership Nashboro / Creed flourished as never before. He quit Nashboro in 1981 and wound up in management at Radio Shack. MCA / Nashboro reissues flourished into the mid-Eighties.

The most widely celebrated talents included here are the **Radio Four** or Babb Brothers from Logan County, Kentucky. The group was founded back in the 1930s. Their first sides were cut at WBDL in Bowling Green for Ernie Newton in 1952. They rose to prominence in the Mid- and Deep South states during the 1950s.

The husband and wife **Consolers** or Spiritual Consolers duet was formed in Miami in 1953 after spending a year as the Miami Soul Stirrers with the addition of Pearl Nance Rayford. They signed with Nashboro in 1955 and enjoyed more than twenty years of commercial success with the label.

The internationally popular **Swanee Quintet** was founded as a trio by Charles Barnwell in Augusta, Georgia in 1944. Lead by Little Johnny Jones in the late 1950s, they rose to significant success. By the mid-1960s they were touring with James Brown. Howard "Slim" Hunt and the **Supreme Angels** of Milwaukee came together in the mid-1950s. As Nashboro artists, they toured the South tirelessly for more than twenty years and became the idols of the Cotton Belt.

**Mdm Edna Gallmon Cooke**, "The Sweetheart of the Potomac," became revered as a pioneer gospel diva of the Holiness Church. She recorded with the Sunset Harmonizers, Singing Sons and Radio Four. **The Angelic Gospel Singers** of Philadelphia with Margaret Allison were formed in South Carolina in 1944, shared recordings with the Dixie Hummingbirds and five years later enjoyed one of gospel's best-selling records of all time, "Touch me Lord Jesus."

**Brother Joe May**, "Thunderbolt of the Middle West," was Willie Mae Ford Smith's most successful pupil. He first waxed in 1949 and spent fourteen years with Nashboro before his sudden death in 1972. **The Gospel Keynotes** of Texas were formed out of the remnants of the New Chosen Gospel Singers of L.A. by Willie Neal Johnson in 1963. They rose to be Nashboro's most commercially successful quartet. **The Pilgrim Jubilees** or Graham Brothers got together in Chicago around 1950. They were signed to Nashboro twice, first in 1958-1959 and then again in the mid-1970s at which time they enjoyed phenomenal nationwide success.

Nashville's currently active Fairfield Four grew to be one of the nation's leading quartets. They recorded from 1946 to 1960 and then made an amazing comeback in 1980. Tommy Ellison and the original **Five Singing Stars** date back to 1959. Ellison also sang in many prominent groups starting with the Singing Sons and ending up in the Chosen Gospel Singers on Nashboro in 1957.

Dorothy Love-Coates and the **Gospel Harmonettes** were organized by Lee Stafford in Birmingham, Alabama in 1948. They were first called the Harmonizers, then Lee Harmonizers. As the Gospel Harmonettes they recorded for R.C.A. in 1949. A year later with Dorothy aboard they began their arduous climb to the top. They signed with Nashboro in 1968.

A few words about the equally talented but lesser celebrated artists included in this 4-CD set. **The Sons of the South** were the Southern Sons, a.k.a. Melody Masters, founded by Cliff Givens in Jackson, Miss. back in 1942. Sadly, Nashboro recorded little by this legendary quartet, then lead by Jessie White. **The Skylarks** hailed from Nashville and were founded by Fairfield Four alumni James S. Hill and Dickie Freeman in 1951. The group, in one form or another, enjoyed a fifteen-year stay with Nashboro during which time the great shout tenors Rev. Crenshaw and Robert Broussard shared leads.

The six-man **Flying Clouds** date all the way back to the Great Depression and were first called the Russell Street Usher Board Four. They went on to become the strongest singing jubilee quarter in the Wolverine State during the 1940s and 1950s. Again, sadly, they conducted only one session for Nashboro with Leroy Barnes. The story of the **Spiritual Five** goes back to the late 1930s and Tyler, Texas. They were founded by Lonzo and "Spooney" Washington and came together again a second time in Chicago during 1953 at the Metropolitan Baptist pastored by Rev. Ledbelly. The group enjoyed six Nashboro sessions over a period of as many years but were undeservedly overlooked.

When Chicago's quartet legend Rebert H. Harris quit the Soul Stirrers in 1950 he formed the **Christland Singers** along with Rev. Leroy Taylor with whom he shared lead. The group recorded only three sessions in the mid-1950s over a period of three years for Nashboro before Harris opted to go with the Gospel Paraders. These recordings are essential collectors' items.

**The Singing Sons** were formed by Carl Coates in 1949 out of soldiers who later became the Sensational Nightingales. Coates also managed Mdm Edna Gallmon Cooke which explains why the group showed up ably backgrounding some of her sides. **The Chosen Gospel Singers** were organized in Houston in 1950 around J.B. Randall and Aaron Wyatt from the Outstanding Gospel Singers. By the time they had signed with Nashboro in 1955 the group was lead by Robert Crutcher and Lou Rawls. All seven singles are also essential collectors' items.

**The Jewel Trio** was put together by Bishop Mattie Lou Jewel of the Jewel denomination of the Pentecostal Church of the Living God in Cleveland in 1952. Original members included Naomi Harrison plus Maggie and Canzetta (Candi) Staton. The trio stayed with Nashboro for four years (1955-1958) and well deserve a CD release of their own.

**The CBS Trumpeteers** made their mark in the gospel world long before signing with Nashboro in 1957. Their original "Milky White Way" became a sizeable hit in 1948. Members in 1957 included Raleigh Turnage, Carey Bradley, Joe E. Johnson, Calvin Stewart and Roland Allen. Stewart led the group in later years. The group still performs although made up of newer members.

Child prodigy, the blind singer and pianist / composer Prof. Harold Boggs of Port Clinton, Ohio formed the traveling **Harold Boggs Gospel Singers** in 1947. He also conducted the choir of the Gypsum Baptist Tabernacle in which the great Lula Reed soloed on occasion. He signed with Nashboro in 1955 and stayed for almost twenty years. In 1958 he recorded "When it hits you," a song later rearranged and rerecorded by Ray Charles as "Yes indeed."

**Sister Lucile (Lucille) Barbee** was Nashville's Queen of Gospel. As barbering gospel radio deejay on WVOL, then WLAC, she often rocked the churches around Nashville. Tutored and brought to Nashboro by Dr. Morgan Babb in 1956 she regrettably recorded sparingly over a period of ten years. Many of her sides were left in the can.

**The Hightower Brothers**, affectionately labeled "The Teenage Blind Boys of Florida" (due to their sound only as they were not blind), were a muscular shout group of enormous talent composed of Rev. Nick Hightower and his sons lead by Robert "Little Sugar" Hightower who went on to sing and play guitar support behind the Supreme Angels.

**The Dixie Nightingales** were an outgrowth of the Gospel Writer Junior Boys of Memphis formed by Elijah Jones in the early 1950s. The group's lead, Ollie Hoskins (Nightingale), crossed over to soul music in the late 1960s and met with some success. **The Gospel Songbirds** of Chicago, a soulful aggregation, were founded by Rev. J. Dowdy in the mid-Fifties. James Phelps led the group before winding up with the Soul Stirrers. Both Otis Clay and Cash McCall sang in the outfit during 1964. **Maggie Ingram**, mother of the Ingramettes (family) of Richmond started singing with the Silver Stars of Richmond in 1962 and in 1964 during the process of raising a family gathered a group to support her. Maggie's voice embodied special ethereal qualities.

**The Brooklyn All Stars** were formed by Charlie Storey in the late 1940s out of the Charlie Storey All Star Singers. A second Brooklyn All Stars group was formed out of the Singing Stars of Louisberg after Thomas Spann took over the quartet in the late 1950s. **Troy Ramey and the Soul Searchers** of Atlanta were a church-wrecking outfit with roots dating back to 1949. This eight-man squad appeared on radio and TV throughout the southlands. Willie Davis and **the Bright Stars** of Flint, Michigan got together in 1958. They first recorded for Plaid in 1959. Their music has since been taken up by the Northern Soul crowd who have found in them connections with funky dance music.

**The Salem Travelers** of Chicago were formed by Sam Cooke-inspired first lead Arthur Davis around 1960. They first cut sides in 1963 for George Leaner at One-derful Records. The great **Ethel Davenport** first waxed in New York for Bob Shad with Brownie McGhee in 1948. Twenty years later she showed up on Nashboro for one single release only. I suspect Shannon may have purchased these from the Davenport estate.

This collection is a representative cross-section of Nashboro artists. Due to limited space, we have had to exclude major acts like Clara Ward, Stars of Faith, Rev. Cleophus Robinson, O'Neal Twins, Bells of Joy and Professor Alex Bradford. However, at least three dozen other significant groups and artists are included. Enjoy some of gospel's best on one of the nation's leading indie labels.

-- Opal Louis Nations  
June 2013