

THE NORFLEET BROTHERS OF CHICAGO

by *Opal Louis Nations*

This June 16th, The Norfleet Brothers of Chicago celebrated their fiftieth anniversary as a gospel jubilee-based singing quartet. Proceedings were conducted by the Rev. Dr. Michael A. Noble Snr. at his church, the Olivet Baptist. Singing guests included The Barrett Sisters, The Chosen Ones, and The Windy City Four. The entire event was sponsored by Sid Ordower Enterprises, producers of Jubilee Showcase, a weekly t.v. show syndicated throughout the country.

The Norfleets have sung on and have been program sponsors for Jubilee Showcase since they recorded for Chess in the early 1960s. The group's current lineup includes bass singer Sylvester Griffin, Joe Norfleet, lead tenor, and Junius Norfleet, all round utility. Jesse Brown sings baritone and bass and lends musical support on guitar while Warren Carton slaps bass and fills in on vocal backgrounds. Joe and Junius are the only surviving members of the original group. The outfit continues to make regular appearances on Willie Wilson's "Singsation" t.v. program aired over Chicago's CBS affiliate, Channel 2. The Norfleets have been a regular fixture on the show for five years now. Plaques were presented to the group during the anniversary proceedings, one such by the City of Chicago for services rendered to the Christian community and many of the Windy City's civic leaders paid their respects.

Although The Norfleets never travel out of the country and do not enjoy universal acclaim, they will always be remembered in the hearts of fans everywhere as being firmly rooted in the Post-war jubilee style tradition. During the Fifties and early Sixties, their six-part harmonies created a broad sound rarely matched by others of the day, a joy to behold.

The Norfleet family hailed from Marion, Alabama, of a rural farming community not far from Demopolis, home to Annie and Linda Wilks and The prestigious Gospel Harmonettes. The entire region is steeped in a rich gospel quartet tradition (see Doug Seroff's excellent Birmingham Quartet Anthology, Clanka Lanka LP 144,001/002 (1980), for further details.) The Norfleet children, ten brothers and five sisters in all, spent most of their formative years around Tuscaloosa where they attended school.

The kids frequented Rev. Vann's Oak Grove Methodist Church and, of course, those who could sing sang in the choir. Controversy surrounds the early beginnings of The Norfleet Brothers quartet. Junius's account tells that James Norfleet was the brother instrumental in forming the original group. James, the non-singing oldest brother, was the first to leave home and settle in Birmingham, Alabama. James, a big fan of The Mills Brothers, would catch their weekly radio broadcast whenever he could and after seeing them in live concert sought to gather his church-singing brothers into a gospel family quartet. Junius asserts that the original Norfleet Brothers (who went by no designated name at first) was composed of James who presumably managed the quartet plus second through sixth-born brothers listed here in descending order of age: Joseph (Joe), Nathaniel, Arthur, Peter, and George.

Joe's account, on the other hand, sounds more plausible. Joe tells of a senior member of the Norfleet family named Moses, nicknamed "Mose" who possessed a singularly fine tenor voice. Mose sang around the central Alabama area as a member (and usually lead singer) of many touring quartets. Other Norfleet offspring sang around in local groups at different times. According to Joe, it was Mose who formed the original Norfleet Brothers quartet in 1946 in Marion when most of his younger brothers received their army discharge papers after World War II. Moses sang occasionally with his brothers and brought the group along. Joe remembers the initial members as being himself plus Junius, Arthur, Peter, and Nathaniel. George joined in time for their first recordings in 1957.

Early singing engagements included revivals and local church picnics. The Norfleet children never missed the syndicated Golden Gate Quartet radio broadcasts, in their area sponsored by a wealthy businessman, the late Andrew Gaston of Birmingham. In the early 1950s, after building a reputation for themselves throughout the South, The Norfleets shifted their pivotal base of operations to Chicago. A string of singing engagements took the group to Detroit where, through an old friend remembered only as "Babe" (possibly the legendary quartet master Bee Baby Coleman of The Golden Leaf Quartette), the brothers were introduced to Joe Von Battle of JVB / Von and Job Records.

Battle ran his own retail record outlet, Joe's Record Store, and had set up a primitive recording studio in back. Battle opened his first record store at 3530 Hastings Street in November 1945 after his Army discharge. The recording service was set up two years later with the release of blues recordings by Walter Mitchell. Joe Von Battle is best remembered as being the first to commercially record Aretha Franklin as a solo item

(although John Reid of Berkeley's Reid's Records is rumored to have been the first to record her in live concert.) Battle primarily recorded blues artists with a few R & B, jazz, and gospel offerings thrown in. Notable groups like The Violinaires and Flying Clouds of Detroit recorded for Battle who at times sold material to other, larger, independent recording firms like Chess, King, and Vee Jay.

Most of the label's early output was pressed in small quantities of one hundred to three hundred copies and basically sold from the bins of his record store without much further distribution. The Norfleets, made up at this point of Joe, Junius, Arthur, Peter, Nathaniel, and George with unknown ragtime piano accompanist and Joe doubling on guitar, cut one session for Battle in the late spring of 1957. "Jesus is all the world to me" and "None but the righteous" (the latter was later leased to Bandera, then to Chess which included the song on the group's 1963 "Shadrack" album) were issued as Job 1115. "Jesus is all the world to me" is metered as an upbeat choral chant. Wild ragtime piano figures make the reading an interesting one. "None but the righteous" is sung with tribute to jubilee, Junius's lead rising by leaps and bounds over the choral songbed. The single is indicative of the prevailing extrovert, hard form of gospel quartet made popular at the time.

"None but the righteous" became the group's most popular and often requested song. Their unique arrangement caught the ear of many an aspiring quartet. The Norfleets' second studio session took place at Divine Grace Records some time during late 1958 or early 1959. Nothing much is known about Divine Grace except that Junius assures me that the label was a small independent and not a one-release-only vanity deal set up to generate work for the group. My suspicion is that the label was part of Violet Muszynski's Bandera/Laredo recording enterprises. The single featured "Mean old world," an urgently conceived vehicle for Junius to wail and moan over the plight of humankind. The flip side, "I got Jesus on my mind" with its beautiful harmonies and rhythmic intricacies, talks of a sinner's salvation.

Out on the gospel highway, The Norfleets' awesome reputation blossomed as they played ballparks, the Dome in New Orleans, the Convention Center in L.A., the Joe Lewis Arena, and scores of other top flight venues. They were the main attraction on three weekly radio programs out of Chicago, once a week over WVON and twice over WBEE. The Norfleets did commercial spots for Quaker Oats through the insistence of Mr. Wilbert, president of WBEE and touted the blessings of owning a car made by General Motors over WSBC AM. The group was even inducted into Washington Library's Hall of Fame.

Some time during 1960, The Norfleets signed with Violet Muszynski of Bandera / Laredo Records. Muszynski ran the Sonny James fan club from out of her Chicago home on South Marshfield and was principally interested in country-rock music but also put out vocal groups, black gospel, and R & B acts. Muszynski also recorded Little Ben and The Cheers, a.k.a. The Norfleet cousins. The Cheers, made up of The Norfleet Brothers' cousins and nephews, waxed four secular singles at Muszynski's studio -- one each turned up on Bell and Laredo and two came out on Rush Records.

Little Ben (Norfleet) & The Cheers

Laredo 2518	Roll that Rigg / * Beggar of love
Rush 601	Beggar of love / ** Brown eyed devil
Rush 603	It's love / The love that I needed
Bell 731	I don't have to cry / Baby you're mine
Penny 101	(I'm not ready to) settle down / Mighty mighty lover
Penny 106	Never more / I'm gonna get even with you

a.k.a. The Norfleet Cousins

Gemini Star 30,007	Beggar love / Brown eyed devil
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* same as Rush 601 & Gemini Star 30,007

** same as Gemini Star 30,007

What was interesting about Little Ben was that one of his recordings, "Roll that rigg," was out and out rockabilly. As both Little Ben & The Cheers and The Norfleet Cousins, Little Ben, John, Merlon, and Frank Norfleet cut one extremely fine deep soul record, variously titled "Beggar love" (Gemini Star 30,007, 1965) and "Beggar of love" (Rush 601, 1964.) The Norfleet Brothers and Norfleet Cousins interchanged as the need arose. Muszynski also worked for Vee Jay Records and used their distributing network and publishing company for her own product. The Norfleets' first 1960-61 Bandera session produced "Draw me nearer," a soulfully beautiful version of "Near the cross" featuring Junius's tearful pleas and anguished cries plus "Standing on the highway" on which Nathaniel extols the virtues of holding to the straight and narrow way. All in all it



The Norfleet Brothers (1963)

(Photo: *Opal Louis Nations Collection*)

was a fine single and for its time a prime example of soul-based gospel.

Some short while after this Muszynski released an extended play disc by The Norfleets on a gospel subsidiary she called Jerico Road. A group going by The Norfolk Bros. also recorded for Jerico Road--this could possibly be the same group as the Norfleet Bros. The EP entitled "Songs of faith and praise" featured traditional versions of old Golden Gate Quartet standards "Shad-rack" and "Jonah" plus "Child of the King" and the first reissue of "None but the righteous." As the full extent of Joe Von Battle's recorded output is unknown to anyone, it could be that Violet Muszynski cut a deal with Battle to license his Norfleet product.

"Jonah" followed the biblical epic as told of old by black preachers stretching back to Rev. F.W. McGee in the 1920s, and even possibly before this date. Holding to a jump tempo, The Norfleets convey the song in an exultant manner. "Child of the King" follows Harriett E. Buell's and John B. Summer's hymn with recitation of the second verse first, followed by the first with the two remaining left out. All of The Norfleets' recorded output for Bandera is of extremely fine quality. Lack of promotion and the group's unwillingness to travel more than a weekend at a time probably contributed to the products' poor sale.

The group's tenure on Sid Ordower's Jubilee Showcase commenced in the early 1960s. Willie Dixon, who often played bass accompaniment on The Norfleets' appearances, introduced the group to the Chess brothers, and in 1963 the outfit became the seventh gospel act to be featured in the Checker Spirituals LP series. Their album entitled "Shadrack" put The Norfleets on the global map, although today the collection is as hard to find as are many low-numbered albums in the series which, thankfully, lasted well into the 1970s with many fine compilations by The Soul Stirrers and The Violinaires.

Junius recalls that the group at this point included himself, Joe, Nathaniel, Arthur, Peter, and George. Yet the Chess promotion photograph shows Nathaniel replaced by Wilson Norfleet. My view is that the latter is correct.

In the mid Sixties, The Norfleets cut one single for Von-Trice. Both songs, "Marching for freedom" and "We all praise him," honor Martin Luther King Jr. and his leadership in marches throughout a segregated south for freedom, justice, and equality. The lyrics to "Marching for freedom" run as follows:

From the deep southern land
Came a great and noble man
And what a great and noble thing
We'll never forget
What he did for us
He even lead us from the back
To the front of the bus
We all praise him, Martin Luther King

Chorus

We all praise him, Martin Luther King
Freedom, freedom
Marching for freedom
Freedom, freedom
Marching for freedom

Upon the throne
Within his power
To turn him away from town
Through all things that were done to him
Mr. King wouldn't turn around
Although the task was hard
He fought it all the way
We'll keep on marching children
For freedom every day

Chorus

Freedom, freedom
Marching for freedom
repeat

It takes a lot of courage
Just to be a man like King
To place your life at stake
Just to let freedom ring
You march, all over the land
With this non-violent stand
Telling all the people
To love and understand

Chorus

Freedom, freedom
Marching for freedom
repeat

Four years later in Memphis, on April 4th, 1968, James Earl Ray, an escaped convict, pleaded guilty to shooting and killing Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and was sentenced to 99 years in prison. While the world was in mourning, The Norfleet Brothers returned to the studios, in this case Rush Records, and recorded "The story of

Martin Luther King" (Parts 1 & 2.) The lyrics from "Marching for freedom were adapted to fit "the story of Martin Luther King," as this sample verse shows:

This is the story of Martin Luther King
The man from Montgomery, Alabama
Freedom, freedom, fighting toward freedom
Freedom, freedom, walk, walk freedom
When the deep saw the light
Came a great noble man
And what he did was a great and noble thing
We all praise him, Martin Luther King
Yes, we all praise him, Martin Luther King

Chorus

Freedom, freedom, fighting toward freedom
We shall never forget
What he did for us
He, he done lead us from the back
To the front of the bus
Although the task was hard
He fought it all the way
We now have freedom boys
And it is here to stay

Chorus

Freedom, freedom, striving for freedom
etc.

The death of the Kennedys and of Dr. King Jr. marked the end of an era, closed the windows of optimism and brought on a darker age of disillusionment. The Norfleet Brothers continued to record and after one more single for Emase waxed a handful of albums for various labels. After becoming a regular fixture on The National Baptist Convention for five years, the brothers cut an album for P. Stampley's Siest Stars label (TPS 111418) The Norfleet lineup included brothers Arthur, Joe, and Junius, a nephew, Caesar J. Norfleet, and George Taylor. While Junius shared lead with Joe (who doubled as usual on guitar), Warren Carthem played bass, Junior Reed rhythm, and Tony Brown, Earnest Allen, and Terry Brewer played second bass, keyboards, and drums.

The collection was called "Little Wooden Church" and contains some breathtaking harmonies and finely honed music. Songs such as "Live in this world in Jesus name," "I trust in God," "He'll be there," "His yoke is easy" and the title cut are rendered with grit and true conviction.

Let us hope The Norfleet family continues on into the next millennium. Good, old fashioned jubilee singing is hard to find anywhere in this day and age.

**The Norfleet Bros. Discography
(1957-69)**

as The Norfleet Brothers

J.O.B. 115	Jesus is all the world to me None but the righteous	1957
Divine Grace 101	Mean old world I got Jesus on my mind	1958-59
Bandera 1319	Draw me nearer Standing on the highway	1960-61
Jerico Road EP 701 (Bandera)	Jonah [also Checker LP(S) 10008] None but the righteous [also JOB 1115, Checker LP(S) 10008 and MCA CD 9336] Shadrack [also Checker LP(S) 10008] Child of the King	1961-62
Checker LP(S) 10008	You can't beat God's giving Live the life Shadrack I trust in God Mean world [could be same as Divine Grace 101] Who is that knocking Let Jesus fix it Yield not to temptation Oh Jonah Blessed quietness On the cross None but the righteous	1963
Von-Trice 701	Marching for freedom We all praise him	1964
Rush 2703	The story of Martin Luther King (Pt. 1) [remake of Marching for Freedom] The story of Martin Luther King (Pt. 2) [slower version of We all praise him]	1968
Emase 1054	Rain Jesus is my friend	1969
