

# THE NORFLEET BROTHERS OF CHICAGO

by Opal Louis Nations



The Norfleet Brothers circa late 1950s. Courtesy Opal Louis Nations.

**T**he Norfleet Brothers are perhaps gospel's most underappreciated jubilee based male quartet. On 16th June, 1966, The Norfleets of Chicago celebrated their fiftieth anniversary as a gospel singing quartet. Proceedings were conducted by the Rev. Dr. Michael A. Noble 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 pioneering weekly television show broadcast on Sunday mornings. 'Jubilee Showcase', hosted and produced by the late Ordower, was one of the longest-running programmes in Chicago television history, having aired from 10th January, 1963 through 8th January, 1984 on WLS-TV, an ABC Network affiliate. 'Jubilee Showcase' featured all the leading gospel groups and soloists of the day and hired first-rate musicians, like keyboardist Jessy Dixon and bassist Willie Dixon, who also served as talent scout.

Almost from the very beginning, The Norfleet Brothers were regulars on 'Jubilee Showcase'. In fact, the group became so widely popular on the programme they were given the task of singing the show's opening theme, 'Shadrack'. The Norfleets became synonymous with the spiritual, which they sang, in a complex yet standard jubilee fashion. Just before the group's retirement at the close of the last century the line-up included bass singer Sylvester Griffin, Joe Norfleet, lead tenor, and Junius Norfleet, all round utility. Jesse Brown sang baritone and bass and lent musical support on guitar while Warren Carton slapped bass and filled in on vocal backgrounds. Joe and Junius were at that time the only surviving members of the original group.

The outfit then made regular appearances on Willie Wilson's 'Singsation' television programme, aired over Chicago's CBS affiliate, Channel 2. The Norfleets, as on 'Jubilee Showcase', became a regular fixture on the show for more than five years.

Although The Norfleets never travelled extensively out of the USA and did not enjoy universal acclaim, they will be remembered for holding fast to the post-war jubilee style tradition. During the 1950s and early 1960s their six-part harmonies created a broad, tight sound rarely matched by others of the day.

## THE FORMATIVE YEARS

The Norfleet family hailed from Marion, Alabama, 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 out-of-print 'Birmingham Quartet Anthology' on 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 at first went without a designated name) 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. Cousin George Taylor joined in time for their first recordings in 1957.

The liner notes to the group's Checker album (Checker LP 10008) described the group's pre 1946 evolution this way: The group's career began on the family farm when brothers Peter and Arthur (ten and twelve years old) started a vocal duo. Soon three brothers joined in the harmonising. The group was just beginning to gel when World War II broke out and the boys were called to service. Although separated, the individual brothers continued to sing in quartets at bases where they were stationed.

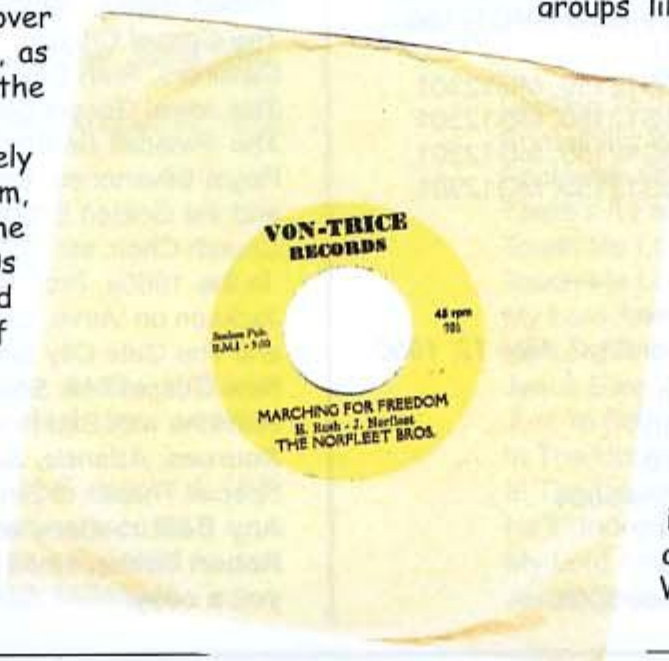
Early post-war singing engagements included revivals and local church picnics. The Norfleet clan never missed the syndicated Golden Gate Quartet radio broadcasts, in their area sponsored by a wealthy businessman, the late Andrew Gaston of Birmingham. In the early 1950s, after building a reputation for 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.

## RECORDING FOR JOE VON BATTLE

Battle ran his own retail record outlet, Joe's Record Store, and had set up a primitive recording studio in the 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 great blues sides by Walter Mitchell. Battle primarily recorded blues, with a few r&b 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.







The Norfleet Brothers circa late 1950s. Courtesy Opal Louis Nations.

Wild ragtime piano figures make the reading an interesting one. 'None But The Righteous' is sung with soulful glee as Junius's lead rises by leaps and bounds over the choral song bed. The single is indicative of the prevailing extrovert, hard but heart-felt 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 enterprise. 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 LA, the Joe Lewis Arena and scores of other top-flight venues. They were the main attraction on three weekly radio programmes 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.

#### RHYTHM & BLUES RECORDINGS

Some time during 1960, The Norfleets signed with Violet Muszynski. 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 (aka 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 Lov/ Brown Eyed Devil  
 \* same as Rush 601 & Gemini Star 30,007  
 \*\* same as Gemini Star 30,007

What is interesting about Little Ben was that one of his recordings, 'Roll That Rigg', was out and out rockabilly. As both Little Ben and 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). In the studios, The Norfleet Brothers and Norfleet Cousins interchanged as the need arose. Muszynski also worked with VeeJay Records and used their distributing network and publishing company for her own product. The Norfleets' first 1960 and 1961 Bandera session produced 'Draw Me Nearer', a beautiful soulful 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 was a fine single and for its time a prime example of soul-based gospel. Both these sides were reissued on the Ace CD, 'Bandera Blues And Gospel From The Bandera, Laredo and Jerico Road Labels Of Chicago'.

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. name 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, 'Shadrack' 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 and sweeten it up for release.

'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 Muszynski's limited finance probably contributed to poor sales. The same was most definitely the case with the poor handling of The Impressions' initial sides.

#### CHECKER RECORDINGS

During the group's tenure on Sid Ordower's Jubilee Showcase, Willie Dixon, house accompanist who often played bass 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' (after the Showcase theme) set The Norfleets on the global stage, 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 ongoing compilations by The Soul Stirrers and Violinaires.

Junius recalls that the group at this point included himself, Joe, Nathaniel, Arthur, Peter and George Taylor. Yet the Chess promotion photograph shows Nathaniel replaced by Wilson Norfleet. My view is that the photo was taken at a different time. Standouts on the Checker album give us many of the Jubilee Showcase favourites, including a joyous, personalised reading of 'Mean World', a wonderfully wailed 'None But The Righteous' supported by full throttled harmony, a sweet, warbling jump tempo version of 'On The Cross', plus just about the finest rendering of H.R. Palmer's 'Yield Not To Temptation' since Ruth Black Castille scored a hit with it some sixteen years earlier on Capitol Records with the St. Paul's Choir of LA.

The album, although overall a joy to listen to, is obviously sweetened by additional instrumentation and audio enhancement to make it more palatable to a broader audience. The Norfleets work best with simple guitar only accompaniment. One can then distinctly appreciate their closeness and complex harmonious antiphony, a dimension which is lost here.

#### MARTIN LUTHER KING

In the mid 1960s, The Norfleets cut one single for Von-Trice. Both songs, 'Marching For Freedom' and 'We All Praise Him', honour Dr. Martin Luther King and his campaign in the South for freedom, justice, and equality.

Four years later in Memphis, on 4th April, 1968, James Earl Ray, an escaped convict, pleaded guilty to shooting and killing Dr. Martin Luther King Jnr. 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'. Both Von-Trice and Rush Records were operated by a Mr. H. Rush.

The death of the Kennedys and of Dr. King marked the end of an era, closed windows of optimism and brought on a gloomy age of disillusionment. The Norfleet Brothers continued to record for small,



The Norfleet Brothers on 'Jubilee Showcase', 1965. Courtesy Opal Louis Nations.



low budget labels, beginning with a one-shot deal on Emase. The single pitched a soulfully indulged version of 'Jesus Is My Friend' with a breakneck run-through of '(Didn't It) Rain'.

Some time during the 1970s the Norfleets cut an album for Arthur Hill's Whirl Hill Recording Company (WH1019.) Nate, George, Arthur, Junius and Joe sing on this fine collection of spirituals and hymns, sung the way The Norfleets do it: close, sweet and down in the country.

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. By the time of The Norfleets' fiftieth anniversary, long serving soldiers were reduced down to just three. When they hung up their hats a short while later, gospel lost one of the finest, old-fashioned jubilee and hymn-singing quartets the country has ever heard. It is hard to find any such bunch of dedicated, down-home-sounding singers in this day and age. In the words of the old spiritual, 'Isn't It A Pity And A Shame'.

Thanks for invaluable input from Junius and Joe Norfleet, Mark Carrodus and Jason Rosenberg.

## The Norfleet Brothers Releases By Opal Louis Nations

### **J.O.B. 1115 (1957)**

Jesus Is All The World To Me/ None But The Righteous

### **DIVINE GRACE (1958-59)**

Mean Old World/ I Got Jesus On My Mind

### **BANDERA 1319 (1960-61)**

Draw Me Nearer/ Standing On The Highway

### **JERICO ROAD EP 701 (1961-62)**

Jonah \*

None But The Righteous \* (also JOB 1115 and MCA CD 9336)

Shadrack \*

Child Of The King

(\* = also Checker LP(S) 10008)

### **CHECKER LP (S) 10008 (1963)**

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

### **VON TRICE 701 (1964)**

Marching For Freedom / We All Praise Him

### **RUSH 2703 (1968)**

The Story Of Martin Luther King Part 1 \*/ Part 2 \*\*

(\* remake of Marching for Freedom)

(\*\* slower version of We All Praise Him)

### **EMASE 1054 (1969)**

Rain/ Jesus Is My Friend

### **WHIRL HILL LP 1019 (1970s?)**

Who's That Knocking

He's Sweet, I Know

I'll Go

Dry Bones

Lord's Prayer

I'm In His Care

John Saw 'Em Coming (aka John Saw Him Coming)

What A Friend

Little David

Close To Thee

Pass Me Not

How Great Thou Art

### **SIEST STARS LP TPS 11418 (1990s)**

I Don't Need Nobody But The Lord

Live In This World In Jesus Name

I Don't Know Why

Little Wooden Church

I Trust In God

He'll Be There

Walk With Me

His Yoke Is Easy