



ODESSA PERKINS – CENTER

The Odessa Perkins Story

by Opal Louis Nations

Odessa Perkins rose from abject poverty in the rural south to being one of the finest and most well-respected gospel contraltos in the San Francisco Bay Area during the 1960s and 1970s. Born January 26, 1930 in Mitchner, Madison County, close by the winding Mississippi River that divides Louisiana from Mississippi near Vicksburg, to Lillie and Ed Golden Perkins, the last of almost a score of siblings, Perkins remembers next to nothing of her parents. "My father skipped out before I was born, and my mother died when I was three months old," says Perkins. An assortment of relatives helped in raising her up. She attended schools in Mound and Tallulah on an irregular basis as she was required to help out around the home.

At age fourteen, she was sent out to work in a laundry where she labored pressing clothes. Perkins also attended the Bethel Baptist Church in Monroe, some fifty miles west of Tallulah along Highway 80. At Bethel, she sang in the choir where her strong, powerful, ear-splitting contralto turned many a head. She enjoyed listening to the regular radio broadcasts of The Golden Gate Quartet and in particular those featuring The Fairfield Four, sponsored by Sunway Vitamins.

Her love of the jubilee refrains perfected by The Fairfield Four lasted through her life, and in later years she became personal friends with the older survivors in the group. Encouraged by an aunt, Aunt Alvinia, Perkins joined The Hodge Singers of Monroe when she was twenty years old. The Hodge Singers were an unrecorded, mixed aggregation who emulated The Gospel Stars, otherwise known as The

Matchless Love Gospel Singers, headed up by the legendary Mae Gooch. The Matchless Love Gospel Singers recorded for Coleman and Haven during the 1940s.

Many of gospel's leading lights concertized in Perkins' home town. Touring groups such as The Fairfield Four, The Five Blind Boys of Mississippi, The Swan Silvertones, Brother Joe May, and The Nightingales all made deep and lasting impressions on her. It was while singing with The Hodge Singers that Perkins was noticed by Carrie-Mae Anderson. Anderson was resident pianist and choral arranger for The Mt. Calvary Baptist Church at 1445 – 23rd Avenue in Oakland, Ca. The Mt. Calvary was pastored, at that time, by the late, great Rev. George W. Killens who sadly passed in July 1975. Killens was one of the first singing firebrand preachers to have himself and his flock recorded on shellac in 1946. His 1947 RPM recording of "Father, I stretch my hands to Thee" set the stage for many successful Bay Area live or remote "In church" atmosphere recordings that followed by the likes of King Louis H. Narcisse and the Rev. Carl Anderson. Killens' early work was recorded in concert at Oakland's Civic Auditorium.

In 1952, Carrie-Mae Anderson brought Perkins out to Oakland where she took up residence on Filbert Street. While a member of the Mt. Calvary Baptist Church Choir, Perkins joined The Spiritual Gospel Singers, an all-male aggregation. The Spiritual Gospel Singers were a "shout-and-get-happy," hard singing quartet in the mold of the legendary Archie Brownlee and The Five Blind Boys of Mississippi. After a short tenure with The Spiritual Gospel Singers, Perkins teamed up with a female group perhaps a little less histrionic called The Lilies of The Valley. Plant names like The Flowers of Joy were in popular use at the time.

By this point, Perkins had advanced to a stage where she felt ready to exploit her own particular talents. In 1955, Perkins assembled the original Lathanettes from members of Bishop Lathan's Israelite Spiritual Temple on East 21st Street in Oakland. "I asked the Bishop," says Perkins, "if we could use his name, seeing as he was willing to help manage us." Charter members, besides Perkins and the bishop, were Dorothy Archie, Marion Marbles, and Lacey Brown. Joe Tugwell accompanied on piano. Both Marbles and Tugwell sang with Perkins in the Mt. Calvary Baptist Choir.

In 1956, Rev. Killens moved his ministry to St. Matthews Church on San Pablo Avenue. Perkins and many members of Killens congregation moved with him. The Lathanettes became an extremely popular outfit around the Bay Area, often sharing church programs with Thomas Rucker's Golden Keys who were recording for Bob Geddins Snr's Irma label at the time, the underrated and irrefutably underrecorded Oakland Silvertones, the shamefully overlooked Goldenaires, and the little known Harps of Joy who bore no kinship with The Harps of the Coast of La Val Records.

The Lathanettes played the Ted Max Amateur Hour. In 1958, The Lathanettes came to the attention of Paul Reid of Reid's Records, a gospel retail outlet on Sacramento Street in West Berkeley. Reid hosted his own Sunday morning gospel radio show over KRE called "Religious Gems." Reid also ran his own modest gospel record company and is thought to have recorded Aretha Franklin before her 1956 Battle label sides. Like the Battle recordings, Franklin was supposedly taped in a live concert setting with her father, the Rev. C.L. Franklin, presiding. Paul Reid had heard The Lathanettes sing at various local churches. Perkins and The Lathanettes recorded "I'm packing up" in The Wards' style plus "Troubled soul" on the Reid Records imprint.

Two years later, Perkins and The Lathanettes cut a single for the tiny Anika label. The titles were "Come on" and "I can't feel at home in this world anymore.'

Because of the extreme rarity of this disc, I have been unable to unearth a copy. Consequently I cannot comment on its merits.

In 1962, during a period when Perkins sang both with The Lathanettes and The Golden Keys, Gertrude Ward came into the picture. Gertrude Ward discovered The Lathanettes. Ward was scouting for groups in the Bay Area to fill the overflow of engagements that the ever popular Ward Singers were asked to fulfill. Gertrude Ward, who founded, managed and sang in The Famous Ward Singers of Philadelphia, ran The Wards' booking agency from the basement of their Philadelphia headquarters. Ward was deeply impressed by The Lathanettes. "Gertrude was looking for two groups to act as The Ward Singers," says Perkins, "one group to commit to engagements on the West Coast and one to fill a string of bookings out in Hawaii." The Lathanettes, now re-christened The Famous Gertrude Ward Singers, went out to Hawaii. The team included Perkins, Helen Johnson, Dorothy Holmes, Alice Houston, and Dorothy Archie.

When the group returned to the mainland, most of the members headed north to fill bookings in Canada. Perkins stayed in Oakland and got herself a regular job picking up again with The Gertrude Ward Singers in Las Vegas later on. Perkins claims to have recorded with The Gertrude Ward Singers on the Vanguard label, but to my knowledge, only The Clara Ward Singers group recorded for that label in 1961 and 1962 respectively. It might be that Perkins attended sessions in New York for Vanguard and that the company chose to keep the material in the can.

In 1963, with a slightly different collection of Gertrude Ward Singers, Perkins cut the "Live at Disneyland" album, produced by Camarata in Hollywood for the Buena Vista label. The concert was recorded on April 18 at Disneyland Park. The Ward line-up included Gertrude Ward, Thelma Jackson, Shirley Walls, Alice Houston, Odessa Perkins, and Adele Shoffield. Charles Coleman played organ, and Margaret Shaw sat in on piano. The collection conveys a whirlwind of high octane energy. Tough singing and tambourine thrashing were the order of the day. Mostly an ensemble effort, the album gives out feelings of joy-filled celebration.

While in Hollywood, The Gertrude Ward Singers flexed their lung-power on a session with the great, late San Diego tenor, Billy Storm. Billy Storm, a secular artist, was given the rare opportunity to cut two of his favorite gospel gems. On the side featuring an impassioned version of "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child," Perkins and the group wail and moan in the background, adding righteous fervor to the session. Billy Storm, then at the tail end of a long and distinguished career in vocal group rhythm and blues, was about to embark on a downward slide into pop-oriented nonsense and commercial drivel. Buena Vista attempted to market Storm as the male equivalent of Annette Funicello, the label's mouseketeer.

Perkins was in and out of The Gertrude Ward Singers for a period ten years. Some time in 1963 Perkins and The Gertrude Ward Singers played the Apollo Theatre. The headliners were James Brown, his band, and a singer he had in his revue by the name of Tammy Montgomery who was enjoying a measure of success with her recording of the eerie "I cried" on Brown's own Try Me label. The Gertrude Ward Singers were given second billing over Babatunde Olatunji, spiritual chanter and drummer from Nigeria.

Between 1963 and 1966, Perkins sang alongside Lawrence "Stickhorse" Stickman in The Oakland All-Stars. Somewhere around this time Perkins and Joe Garrett, the singer/pianist who replaced Joe Tugwell in The Lathanettes, cut a single for Chap-Perk, a vanity label set up by the artists. The topside highlighted Perkins on a disciplined version of Mahalia Jackson's "(I'm gonna) tell God" with Garrett playing

inspired piano. The reverse, a warm duet reading of Charles A. Tindley's "Nothing between" finds Perkins and Garrett (who gives out an unusually high soprano-like tenor) in fine vocal form. "Tell God" has remained a much requested song among friends over the years.

In 1968, The Lathanettes, composed of Perkins, Dorothy Archie, Lacey Brown, Joyce Beasley, Helen Johnson, and Joseph Wynder, recorded an album entitled "Letting the Master have His way" for Willie Hoskins' Boola-Boola label based on Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley. Joseph Wynder doubled on piano, Gerald Hemmingway played organ, and Daniel Roy, Leroy Watkins, and Curtis Moore played guitar, bass and drums. The album is extremely hard to find. Only a limited number of records were pressed, and like the Boola-Boola album by The Natural Four, is as rare as dinosaur teeth. This writer has heard only two Perkins-led songs from this collection. The title cut, "Letting the master," etc., is a joyous foot-stomping, hand-clapping chart with strong, solid piano and organ support, and "Packing up," a deep soul-colored ballad, is belted out with great gusto to relentless musical accompaniment.

This small sample alone demonstrates that Perkins had by now reached the peak of her enormous ability. Few records match the excitement generated on "Packing up," which differs from a song made widely popular by Marion Williams and The Ward Singers cut in 1956 for Savoy Records.

The Lathanettes caught the attention of James Sheldon, the director in charge of organizing USO shows for the troops overseas. "Sheldon put sunshine into every act he sent out," says Perkins, "sunshine this and sunshine that, so we became The Sunshine Jubilees and were sent over to Viet Nam to sing for our boys. They would have us stand at the open doorways of helicopters in flight and we sang to the troops dug in under our flight path."

In 1971, The Sunshine Jubilees waxed an album for Leo Kulka's Golden Soul Records on Harrison Street in San Francisco. The album, an equal opportunity, ensemble effort, finds Perkins behind others who take turns at the lead singer's spotlight. The Sunshine Jubilees were made up of Perkins, Archie, Brown, Beasley and De Loris H. Cooper a.k.a. Helen Johnson of the Boola-Boola group. Garrett sang and played piano, Gregory Green served as organist and alternate pianist while Terry Jackson, Darrell Broadnaux and Richard Davis held forth on guitar, bass and drums. The album follows the usual joyous, upbeat formula. Perkins steps forward on one song, Grover Blake's "I've made it over," which she handles with grit and gusto. As is often the case, she gives out her customary 101 percent.

The Lathanettes were disbanded by the close of the 1970s, and a new younger, mixed ensemble labeled The Mighty Serenades sprung up in their place. The original Mighty Serenades were composed of Perkins, who served as manager, trainer and lead, Peggy Phillips, Veronica Smith, Thomas Smith, Julia Pride and Elijah Baker. The Mighty Serenades had a winning stage presentation and featured strong, able soloists. They toured California and throughout the South playing venues in Louisiana, Texas and Mississippi. In 1976, Perkins took time out to serve a two-year assignment with The Oakland Silvertones. The Mighty Serenades hung together into the 1990s, when, due to Perkins' failing health, they had to limit their engagements to the weekends.

Over the years, Perkins had kept up a long, warm and happy friendship with Cleve and Clay Graham, key elements of The Pilgrim Jubilee Quartet headed up by Major Roberson. The Pilgrim Jubilees, or "Jubes" as they are fondly referred to by their friends, were founded by Cleve and Clay Graham who grew up suffering the worst imaginable poverty in rural Houston, Mississippi. Perkins and the Graham brothers

shared a common thread or bond, each understood the other's plight. A close friendship has lasted for most of their lives.

In 1990, Perkins gathered up The Lathanettes for a reunion get-together. Fortunately, they went into rehearsal practice session and had a tape recorder going. One of the songs the group ran through was "I'll be alright," which, much to my enjoyment, found Perkins at center stage, preaching and shouting and getting happy like old times. One was firmly reminded of how good things were back in the 1960s when Perkins and her Lathanettes tore up the churches.

Perkins also spent a good deal of her life as a concert promoter. As is quite common in gospel music, regionally known singing groups, such as The Lathanettes, would often make up their own major concert venues by importing nationally known aggregations and having them headline to fill seats. The lesser known host group usually stepped out as the opening or warm-up act. Perkins brought Howard "Slim" Hunt and The Supreme Angels out to the East Bay Area in the 1960s. The Salem Travelers and Master Keys of Los Angeles came in the 1970s. The Sweet Singing Cavaliers, Chosen Sons of God, Pilgrim Wonders, Highway Q C's, Fairfield Four, Marquees of Los Angeles, Long Beach Southernaires, and Wonderful Harmonizers of Huntsville, Texas all concertized during the 1980s. Some appeared as items on The Gospel Super Bowl, an annual gospel extravaganza Perkins organized to get Bay Area church music fans interested in the joys of traditional quartet singing.

Perkins often filled out the lower half of her hand-bills with good proven local talent. Today, Perkins is in semi-retirement and only occasionally goes out to sing whenever invited. But believe me, it never takes much to get her out there in front of her many fans who have all followed her impressive career over the years.

Odessa Perkins has made fine, honest-to-goodness, no frills, all grit gospel singing her life blood, and all those fortunate enough to have gained from the experience of seeing her in the flesh, standing squarely like the great Ruth Davis, the only comparable singer, can attest to her enormous talent rooted in a firm and lasting conviction.

--- Opal Louis Nations
Oakland, July 1997