

REV. MACEO WOODS
AND THE CHRISTIAN TABERNACLE CONCERT CHOIR



Hello Sunshine

THE VOLT RECORDINGS

Rev. Maceo Woods is today, at age 65, so active one wonders how he finds time to sit in front of his TV set to watch his beloved NBA team, the Chicago Bulls. His most pressing concern centers around his Gospel Supreme Foundation, which not only helps set up local businesses for young people but assists in buying old abandoned buildings in urban areas so that they might be converted into halfway houses for the poor with special emphasis on destitute mothers and their children.

The fully computerized ministry houses a video studio in which the Tabernacle Choir records their weekly TV cable program, *Good News*, broadcast over Channel 25 both at 8:00 Sunday mornings and again at 8:00 Saturday evenings. One branch of the foundation finances the Golden Cup Award, a yearly event where a trophy is given to gospel singers and choirs for lifelong achievement. Albertina Walker and Sister Eugene Smith are among the many honorees.

"We are currently working on a CD featuring some of our newer, younger soloists for our own Gospel Supreme label," states Woods, "and the musical arrangements will stay, as always, in the traditional realm." Woods's ministry encompasses the Christian Tabernacle barbershop, furniture store, cosmetology academy, and physical fitness center. "Gospel is my life," asserts Woods, "and everything I build is built around His spoken word."

Woods has come a long way from humble beginnings to a seat on the board of the Broadcast Ministers' Alliance. Born April 23, 1932 in South Chicago's Morgan Park, the youngest of seven surviving brothers and sisters, Woods attended

the Morgan Park High School and Mount Calvary Baptist Church. His father, Fred Woods, ran a lucrative wholesale trucking business. Woods's introduction to the organ came about at Lyon and Healey's Music Store. He had discovered an interest in music while attending the John D. Shoop Elementary School. What started out as regular piano lessons became a gradual mastery of the much more complicated electric organ. Woods formed the Maceo Woods Male Chorus from out of parishioners of the Mt. Calvary Baptist Church while barely into his teens. From the chorus, Wood picked the original Maceo Woods Singers. After high school, he attended the Chicago Medical School in Roosevelt and helped pay tuition with the proceeds from church concerts given with his singers.

Music gradually took precedence over medicine. Opting for the former, Woods found himself at the Sherwood School of Music. Woods grew up and became strong friends with the late James Cleveland, who introduced him to Prof. Alex Bradford. Bradford encouraged Woods to use his voice along with his hands and feet.

In 1952, Bradford introduced Woods to Bess Berman at Apollo Records on West 45th Street in New York. The Maceo Woods Singers cut one moderately successful record for Apollo. In June 1953, Vivian and John Carter were holding auditions at WGRY in Gary, Indiana (at which Vivian hosted a weekly gospel radio show) to seek talent for a record company they had just set up on Chicago's East 47th Street called Vee-Jay Records. Woods signed as Vee-Jay's third recording artist at Vivian's Record Store in downtown Chicago.

The original Maceo Woods Singers recorded for Vee-Jay over the course of a year. During the summer of 1954, Vivian Carter recorded Woods playing "Amazing Grace" during a noodling session at WWCA, the station to which Carter had switched to present her gospel show. Taken up as Carter's signature tune, this rough, unpolished organ instrumental took off like wildfire.

Copies sold were reported topping a million (several hundred thousand present a more realistic account). Woods stayed with Vee-Jay Records for twelve years during which time he recorded organ solos, with two sets of his own group, and behind other stellar artists such as the Highway QC's and Original Five Blind Boys of Mississippi. He also partnered with Delores Washington and waxed behind his own Christian Tabernacle Ensemble. A total of six Vee-Jay albums were issued under his own imprint over a period of twenty years.

Woods's early organ style was filled with dramatic, swelling timbres and soft, sweeping, sometimes sustained passages. He played with much passion and color. In 1962, Woods accompanied the Staple Singers and Rev. Cleophus Robinson on Orrin Keepnews's notable Riverside and Battle sessions (see Milestone CD 47028-2 and Specialty CD 7055-2).

In 1969, Woods's pianist/singer/choirmaster George Jordan, referred to fondly by Woods as his "God brother," wrote an arrangement for two soloists and choir of "Hello Sunshine," a chart originally penned by the late King Curtis with Ronald A. Miller. (Woods swears that "God brother"—now minister of music and chaplain-at-large—originated the song.) Woods played a test copy of the

tune to his friend Harold Freeman who created the Sunshine Record Company to present the song and the Christian Tabernacle Choir to the general public. The record made the rounds of the local gospel jocks who played it with enthusiasm, none more so than sometime blues and gospel singer Dwight "Gatemouth" Moore of WDIA who plugged "Hello Sunshine" with vigor.

The record became a regional success and eventually caught the appreciative ears of Al Bell and Jim Stewart of Stax/Volt Records in Soulville (Memphis). Bell and Stewart flew north to the Windy City and met with Woods and Freeman at Ernie Leaner's United Distributors on South Michigan Avenue. A deal was struck and "Hello Sunshine" was re-released as Volt single 4025. Weeks later, Jessy Dixon and his Chicago Community Choir recorded a decelerated version for Herman Lubinsky's Gospel label in Newark, NJ. The Chicago-based Soul Stirrers got in on the act and etched a cover with Little Willie Rogers at the helm for Chess Records.

The single did so well that Stax issued the first of two Maceo Woods-produced Volt albums, both gathered here (with the exclusion of four songs, due to lack of space) for the first time on CD. Woods by now had reached a point where his time was divided between preparing sermons and his ever-expanding church-related outreach programs.

"Hello Sunshine" is a catchy call-and-response vehicle that excites in the same way as a cleffing by Peggy Scott and Jo Jo Benson. Co-soloist Lora Burton has now quit Chicago and is currently retired somewhere in South Carolina. The late charter choir soloist Pearl McCombs proffers a jazzy

approach to "Surrender to His Will," played in boogie-woogie time. McCombs personalizes the lyrics to "Think of His Goodness," sung hard and strong with eloquence and grit. Three more charter choir members solo on this set. At the time of the recording, all had served for nine years.

The first of these is lyric tenor (and hair stylist) Melvin Smothers, who jumps and swings on "I Know God Cares for Me." Smothers stretches out and testifies on "Step to Jesus" and on "Reach Out and Touch (Somebody's Hand)" bares his soul in joyous supplication. Second charter soloist, soprano Doris Sykes, gives a stunning concert performance of "The Name of Jesus" reminiscent of blind diva Princess Stewart. Sykes is currently an executive secretary working in Chi-Town.

Third charterist, retired schoolteacher Lawrence Ester, is given the spotlight on "We See God with the Eyes of Our Soul," a mostly choir vehicle given a Wings Over Jordan treatment. His work on "Let My People Go" expresses his operatic inclinations. "God brother" Jordan not only shares lead with Lora Burton on "Hello Sunshine" but with her aid gets the church moving on the fervent "I'm Mighty Grateful." Jordan shakes the rafters on the bluesy "I'll Get Home Someday" and truly ignites on "Beams of Heaven."

His pairing with Woods on "Bringing in the Sheaves" lends passion and dignity to Knowles Shaw's hymn. After a complex choral reading of "Hear My Prayer," Woods reprises his Vee-Jay organ standard, "Amazing Grace." His playing almost carbon-copies the original but is of added length. It is a shame that Woods did not see fit to record more of his organ stylings at this time.

Other soloists include Pandora McCombs, and Richard Jackson, who takes wing on "I'm Going to Live the Life I Sing About." Jackson is now firmly anchored and works for the Cook County tax department.

The Volt single of "Hello Sunshine" hovered for six weeks on *Billboard's* R&B chart in late 1969 and rose to peak at number 28. After five albums on the Gospel Truth label (which included the reissue of the two Volt collections sampled here), Woods and the Christian Tabernacle Choir moved over to Savoy Records of Newark.

The Christian Tabernacle Choir is one of the finest of the few remaining traditional aggregations whose musical roots can be traced back to the great post-war works of the Voices of Victory and Wings Over Jordan Choir.

—Opal Louis Nations
February 1997

#1-3:

The Christian Tabernacle Concert Choir:

LORA BURTON, PEARL McCOMBS, RICHARD JACKSON, MELVIN SMOTHERS, DORIS SYKES,

LAWRENCE ESTER—vocals;
other vocalists unknown

GEORGE JORDAN—piano, vocals

ALBERT MEDDERS—organ

BILLY CARSON—drums

REV. MACEO WOODS—conductor

Recorded in 1969; Chicago

#9-17:

The Christian Tabernacle Concert Choir:

ALFREDA BURTON, KATIE GLANTON, SYLVIA JACKSON,
NOVELLA JOHNSON, PANDORA McCOMBS, LUTHERINE
MILLER, ODESSA OLLISON, DORIS SYKES—sopranos

LELA BLANCHARD, DOROTHY CLARK, PEARL
McCOMBS, ELEANOR NICHOLS, VERA MILLER, ELLA
SHIRLEY, ELEANOR SMITH, LIZ TAYLOR—altos

EUGENE BORDEN, ALBERT BRANHAM, FRED
BRYANT, JOHN CONNELLY, ERIC MCKINNEY,
RICHARD JACKSON, MELVIN SMOTHERS, SIDNEY
TUNSILL, LANCE WRIGHT—tenors

JWAN BODDIE, JOHN DYES, LAWRENCE CHAMBERS,
LAWRENCE ESTER, ROBERT GALLOWAY, ALFRED

SMITH, EDWARD SMITH—basses

GEORGE JORDAN—piano, vocals

ALBERT MEDDERS—organ

BILLY CARSON—drums

REV. MACEO WOODS—conductor, vocals (on #16)

Recorded approximately 1970; Chicago

#18:

REV. MACEO WOODS—organ

Recorded in 1969; Chicago

#1-8 and 18 originally issued on *Hello Sunshine*
(Volt V-6009), which was reissued as *In Concert*
(Gospel Truth GTS-2703 or GT-14002).

#9-17 originally issued on *Step to Jesus* (Volt V-6013),
which was reissued as *Jesus People* (Gospel Truth GTS-
2704 or GT-14003).

Original sessions produced by REV. MACEO WOODS

Original recording engineers unknown

Compiled for reissue by LEE HILDEBRAND

Art direction—Jamie Putnam

Design—Gilles Margerin

Remastering, 1997—Joe Tarantino
(Fantasy Studios, Berkeley)

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