

THE GREAT 1955 SHRINE CONCERT

FEATURING

The **Pilgrim TRAVELERS**

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★

Dorothy Love Coates
Original Gospel
HARMONETTES



THE
CARAVANS
featuring
**ALBERTINA
WALKER** AND
**JAMES
CLEVELAND**



THE FAMOUS . . .
SOUL STIRRERS

FEATURING
SAM COOKE AND PAUL FOSTER

ALSO FEATURING
ETHEL DAVENPORT
AND **ANNETTE MAY**

**BROTHER
JOE MAY**



SHRINE AUDITORIUM

LOS ANGELES

FRIDAY JULY 22 7 P.M.

In today's gospel music, live albums are becoming increasingly prevalent. Studio recordings simply cannot top the intense interaction that takes place between artist and audience during "programs," as the faithful refer to concerts, whether in church or commercial venues. The increase in gospel music captured outside the studio was abetted by the advent of multi-track recording equipment, which not only makes it possible for engineers to create a satisfactory sound balance after the fact through remixing, but affords the artists the opportunity to fix flaws in their performance through a technique called punching in.

Prior to the Sixties, in the dark ages before multi-tracking, the in-person recording of gospel was far more problematic. With only one track available, it required that the engineer place the microphone in just the right spot in order to get a good balance among members of a group. And in gospel, more so than in other forms, the performers, caught up in the religious fervor of the moment, would sometimes stray off mike, frequently into the midst of the audience, thus throwing the carefully planned balance right out the window.

Record company A&R men had recognized the need to capture the give and take between gospel artist and audience as early as the Twenties and sometimes simulated this by inviting an entire congregation into the studio. Among the earliest actual live gospel recordings were a series of 78s made around 1947 by Rev. G.W. Killens. Originally from Monroe, Louisiana, the pastor of Oakland, California's Mount Calvary Missionary Baptist Church was recorded singing and preaching in front of his effusive choir and an equally jubilant Oakland Auditorium Arena

audience by producer Ollie Hunt. Although initially issued on Hunt's obscure Olliet label, they created such a stir that they were eventually picked up for national distribution by such companies as RPM, Imperial, and Recorded in Hollywood. One of Rev. Killens's records caught the ear of Brother Joe May, Specialty Records' male gospel singing star.

"People are shouting and *carrying on*," May wrote Specialty owner Art Rupe in a letter dated March 17, 1952. "To tell you the truth," he added, "I could do this better if I would rehearse it." May also noted that Randy Wood, head of the biggest gospel record mail-order house in the country (thanks, in no small part, to saturation advertising over Nashville's clear-channel WLAC), had told him that the Rev. Killens record was "the best seller of today."

Rupe promptly took up the suggestion, recording May, along with the Sallie Martin Singers, at the Elks Auditorium, in Los Angeles on June 27, 1952. (One selection from that program is available on May's *Thunderbolt of the Middle West* [SPCD-7033-2] in this Legends of Gospel series and another on the Martin Singers' *Throw Out the Lifeline* [SPCD-7043-2], with more to come in a future CD by Brother May.) Specialty continued recording May and some of its other artists, including the Swan Silvertones and the Original Gospel Harmonettes, in live performances over the next two years. The sound quality was sometimes suitable, but more often the voices were distorted (especially in the case of pipes as gargantuan as May's) or badly off mike.

In 1955, Rupe resolved to go all out and recorded four of his hottest gospel attractions—the Pilgrim Travelers, Brother Joe May, the Soul Stirrers, and

the Original Gospel Harmonettes—at the much larger Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles. For this task he dispatched producer Robert “Bumps” Blackwell, who’d been perfecting the art of remote recording in clubs with his own jazz band. The results, most of which had remained unissued until now, constitute the first-ever all-star live gospel album from the genre’s so-called Golden Age, featuring not only the four Specialty artists in their prime, but another major group, the Caravans, and two lesser-known singers, Annette May and Ethel Davenport. It could be argued that Sister Rosetta Tharpe’s wedding to Russell Morrison, recorded before a crowd of 22,000 at Washington, D.C.’s Griffith Stadium on July 3, 1951, and issued on a series of 78s (and later on LP) by Decca, was the first such album, but its lineup of Tharpe and her Rosettes, the Harmonizing Four, the Sunset Travelers, and one Bishop Wells pales in comparison to this.

Operated by the Ancient Arabic Order of Nobles of the Mystic Shrine, a fraternal organization dedicated to charitable works, the Shrine Auditorium opened its doors at 649 W. Jefferson Boulevard (in what is now considered old downtown Los Angeles) in 1926. With a seating capacity of 6,444, it was said to be the largest auditorium in the country. Indeed, it was so huge that the University of Southern California basketball team used to play its games on the *stage*, with spectators on the floor and in the balcony. Besides being the location of the annual Shrine Circus, the venue was—and still is—made available to promoters of all variety of events. Norman Granz held a number of his Jazz at the Philharmonic concerts there in the Forties and Fifties, as did Gene

Norman with his Blues Jubilees. Both impresarios recorded some of these proceedings for what are now legendary discs.

Billed as the “First Annual Mid-Summer Festival of Gospel Music,” the July 22, 1955 gospel program recorded by Specialty Records was produced by Brother Clarence Welch, a disc jockey and the leading promoter of gospel concerts in Southern California at the time. The musical participants were part of a loose-knit tour that performed as a package in major cities, then split into segments for appearances in smaller towns. The package started out in Kansas City, then on to Oklahoma and Texas, and played the Oakland Auditorium Arena before heading to Los Angeles. For Brother Joe May, his daughter Annette, and their friend Ethel Davenport, it was the last engagement before they headed back to the Midwest. Annette recalls that the Shrine was packed that Friday night.

This Compact Disc contains the proceedings, in their actual order of occurrence, of the Shrine concert’s first hour and a quarter. While the opening remarks, by Brother Welch and the Pilgrim Travelers’ J.W. Alexander, were captured on tape, the machine was switched off during some of the later spoken comments. Of the selections in this set, only the Pilgrim Travelers’ “Straight Street,” Brother Joe May’s “I’m Happy Working for the Lord,” the Soul Stirrers’ three-song set, and a segment of the Gospel Harmonettes’ medley were previously issued—all with drums added on years later. They are now presented in the context of the other selections that surrounded them and in pristine, unoverdubbed form.

Little need be said about the five Specialty artists—the Pilgrim Travelers, Brother Joe May, Annette May, the Soul Stirrers, and Dorothy Love Coates' Original Gospel Harmonettes—as information on their lives and music can be found in earlier booklet notes for this series by Anthony Heilbut and ourselves, as well as from other sources. However, comments about the two non-Specialty artists are in order.

Formed in 1952 in her native Chicago by Albertina Walker and other former members of the Robert Anderson Singers, the Caravans soon became the most successful group in gospel music. From 1954 through 1958, they benefited from the brilliant songs, arrangements, piano accompaniment, and occasional lead vocals of James Cleveland. "We grew up together in Chicago," Walker says. "James used to play for me and my sister when we were kids." At the Shrine, Cleveland reprised "What Kind of Man Is This," an original composition he'd recorded with the Caravans for the States label a year earlier. The surprise, however, is "Since I Met Jesus"; Bessie Griffin had taken the lead on the group's 1953 recording, but with Griffin gone, Walker instead applied her own rich alto pipes to an extended reading of the Alex Bradford ballad. As they had with Cleveland, the Caravans would later serve as a springboard for the solo careers of Inez Andrews and Shirley Caesar, among others. Walker herself remains a vital force in gospel music.

The concert's one selection by the late Ethel Davenport, a haunting rendition of "My Troubles Are So Hard to Bear" on which she was supported vocally by Brother Joe May and his children Annette and Charles, is a welcome addition to this powerful

contralto's meager discography. Born in Middleburg, Florida on April 12, 1910, she was raised in the Mixon Town section of Jacksonville, Florida, and during the Fifties recorded two singles for the Gotham label, four for Imperial, one for Herald, and one for Nashboro. Davenport also organized gospel programs in Jacksonville, some featuring Brother Joe May, who returned the favor by carrying her along as a guest soloist on his 1955 summer tour.

The program reached a fever pitch during the intense medley by the Gospel Harmonettes with which this Compact Disc closes, and continued on for another 40 minutes or so. There were second sets by the Pilgrim Travelers, the Caravans, and Brother May, during which the tape kept rolling. But as the Spirit took even firmer hold, the singers drifted more and more off microphone. Some of those selections are therefore unusable. Others, however, are slated to appear on future releases in this series.

—Lee Hildebrand and Opal Nations, 1993

THE PILGRIM TRAVELERS:

1. **SPOKEN INTRODUCTION** :52
2. **ALL THE WAY** 3:10
(previously unissued)
(writer unknown)
3. **STRAIGHT STREET** 2:34
(previously issued with overdubs)
(Whitaker-Alexander) ATV-BMI

THE CARAVANS:

4. **SINCE I MET JESUS** 6:48
(previously unissued)
(Alex Bradford) Unichappell Music-BMI
5. **WHAT KIND OF MAN IS THIS** 3:19
(previously unissued)
(James Cleveland) publ. unknown

BROTHER JOE MAY:

6. **IT'S A LONG, LONG WAY** 5:10
(previously unissued)
(Mary Lou Parker) publ. unknown
7. **I'M HAPPY WORKING FOR THE LORD** 3:49
(previously issued with overdubs)
(Morris-Smith) P.D.

ANNETTE MAY:

8. **REMARKS BY BROTHER JOE MAY** 1:09
9. **CONSIDER ME** 5:21
(previously unissued)
(Thomas A. Dorsey) Unichappell-BMI

THE SOUL STIRRERS:

10. **I HAVE A FRIEND ABOVE ALL OTHERS** 3:40
(previously issued with overdubs and edit)
(Sam Cooke) publ. unknown
11. **BE WITH ME JESUS** 7:50
(previously issued with overdubs)
(Cooke) Abkco Music-BMI
12. **NEARER TO THEE** 8:36
(previously issued with overdubs)
(Cooke) Abkco-BMI

ETHEL DAVENPORT:

13. **MY TROUBLES ARE SO HARD TO BEAR** 3:32
(previously unissued)
(writer unknown)

DOROTHY LOVE COATES AND THE ORIGINAL GOSPEL HARMONETTES:

14. **MEDLEY:** 18:43
YOU MUST BE BORN AGAIN
(Dorothy Love Coates) ATV-BMI
GET AWAY JORDAN
(arr. Coates) P.D.
THE FIRE KEEPS ON BURNING
(writer unknown)
IT'S GETTING LATE IN THE EVENING
(John Evans, arr. Coates) ATV-BMI
YOU MUST BE BORN AGAIN
(Coates) ATV-BMI
(previously unissued in complete form)

STARRING:

DOROTHY LOVE COATES AND THE ORIGINAL GOSPEL HARMONETTES, THE SOUL STIRRERS (FEATURING SAM COOKE AND PAUL FOSTER), BROTHER JOE MAY, THE CARAVANS (FEATURING ALBERTINA WALKER AND JAMES CLEVELAND), THE PILGRIM TRAVELERS, ETHEL DAVENPORT, AND ANNETTE MAY

