

THE SUNLIGHT JUBILEE SINGERS OF ALAMEDA

## by Opal Louis Nations

The Sunlight Jubilees had a lot going for them: tight harmonies, strong leads and great overall jubilee sound. They were both dynamic and exciting. What they lacked was good management and the glue to hold the group together.

The Sunlight Jubilee Singers were the brainchild of Joseph L. Scott. Scott was born September 15, 1917 in the tiny farming community of Grove in Cotton Valley, north of Minden, Louisiana. His parents, Robert Scott Jnr. and Josephine Stovall, kept livestock and raised corn, peas and cotton on a 260 acre spread owned by Robert Scott Snr., Joseph's grandfather. The family scraped a living through the sale of their cotton crop. All attended the Blue Run Baptist Church where Robert Scott Snr. served as deacon.

Two of Joseph's uncles, Roy and Alton, sang in a local quartet known as The Union Grove Singers. The Union Grove Singers sang around neighborhood churches. In 1944, after marriage and the birth of Malvin, a son, Joseph C. Scott moved from Grove to The Estuary housing projects in Alameda, California to work at the Naval Air Station. In 1946, at naval supply, Scott hooked up with Wiley Bradford, William M. Henry and Milton Castille. Together with Cleveland Lee Wilcox from the pressing plant they formed The Sunlight Jubilee Singers.

They were joined briefly by a lead singer, remembered only as Bob, but Bob was soon replaced by Scott himself. Scott and Wilcox sang baritone, Castille tenor, Henry bass and Bradford assumed lead. In Alameda, Scott attended The Community Baptist Church, but the group never became affiliated. From Alameda, the Scott family moved to Ashby Avenue in Berkeley where Scott set up a rehearsal space in his living room

for local and visiting gospel groups. The Paramount Gospel Singers, Friendly Five (a female aggregation from Little Rock), The Golden Harps and The Rising Stars all rehearsed at the Scott household.

Scott attended The Antioch Baptist Church on Fourteenth Street and rehearsed his group. None of the members knew how to read music. Songs were gone over either with or without guitar chording. It was decided that Vance "Tiny" Powell, who was singing in The Paramount Gospel Singers at the time, would coach the group in voice training. They soon got to where they could sing any type of music: blues, gospel or R & B. The Sunlight Jubilees auditioned for The Standard Oil Company over KGO TV. Standard Oil liked what they heard and set up some training for them. The company sponsored a music-in-the-schools project, and artists were paid by Standard to record songs for the program.

The Sunlight Jubilees taped one song, "Nobody knows the trouble I've seen," and were paid \$550 each for thirty minutes of work, a handsome sum, even by today's standards. The song was broadcast, but the group was never asked to repeat the deed. Later on, the group opted to join the Musician's Union which cost them \$155 a piece, just for the privilege of being a member. The group was introduced to the late Bob Geddins Snr. at Big Town Records through Ted Willoughby, a Caucasian jeweler who scouted for Geddins.

Willoughby, who dabbled in popular black music, shared a stake in Geddins' Down-Town label. Some time towards the close of the 1940s decade, The Sunlight Jubilees recorded one session at Bob Geddins' Seventh Street studio, just a stone's throw away from the illustrious nightery, Slim Jenkins Place. Six songs were committed to tape, and three 78 rpm recordings were issued over a short period. The first of these, "In the army of the Lord," is extremely hard to find, and a copy of it has never passed my way. The record is so rare not even the title on the reverse is known.

"Glory, glory Hallelujah" is given the standard acappella treatment with Bradford's high tenor wailing out the verses and the group chanting out the chords in perfect time. The beautiful "Bye and bye" is performed in slow funereal tempo. Bradford drops into effortless falsetto and at times reminds one of Tommy Jenkins, Bradford's rival lead soloist with The Rising Star Gospel Singers. "Since (my) mother's been gone" is shouted out with fervor and conviction. Bradford sounds strangely like blues stylist J.B. Lenoir here. The vocal background work is strong and firm and is a perfect backdrop for Bradford's tenor meanderings.

Kenneth Morris's "Yes God is real," like "Bye and bye," is rendered with Jenkins-like soul and passion. All four songs were recorded acappella with the bass laying down the rhythmic foundation and the group sounding as a single voice.

The group played church engagements in Berkeley, Oakland, Richmond, Stockton, Sacramento, Redwood City and down in the Southern California smog belt. They did not venture beyond the California state line. All had families and none wanted to tour out of state. They all had grand ambitions, but the outfit never really took off. At one point, the group rehearsed for two months with the one hundred member Carman Dragon Orchestra, up from the Southland, but things never went anywhere. They would make regular announcements of upcoming concerts over KWBR (now KPIA). The fiery Rev. Geatry of the Holiness denomination would do the announcing and get the sisters out to the engagements.

The Rev. Kellam out of Chicago offered concerts in the Windy City plus a bunch of returning engagements throughout the Southern states, but because Wiley Bradford was sick, the group had to decline. Geddins and Willoughby lost interest in the group because of their unwillingness to travel. Scott has always maintained that the 711 Seventh Street session was simply a rehearsal run-through. He says that no recordings were planned, no contracts signed, no agreements made. The three records were recorded and released without Scott's knowledge. Up to the time this writer made contact with him, he had not heard any of the songs.

In 1952, Scott and the group parted company. With the addition of Whit Bryant, they changed names to Wiley Bradford & The Hi-Tones. Bryant states that the group at this time was trying to make inroads into the popular music market. The Hi-Tones became a regular fixture at Slim Jenkins Place but they never recorded.

— Opal Louis NationsFebruary 1997

## THE SUNLIGHT JUBILEE GOSPEL SINGERS DISCOGRAPHY

In the Army of the Lord Down-Town 2007
Title unknown

Glory, Glory Hallelujah
Bye and bye

Since mother's been gone Per Down-Town 2014
Yes God is real