The Fantastic Violinaires

by Opal Louis Nations



For the focus on the beginnings of the Violinaires, we need to start with the great, late baritone lead Willie Banks who sadly passed due to complications associated with a perforated lung on February 1, 1993. Banks was born in Raymond, Mississippi around 1935 and had started out as a local choir soloist at age five. After stays with various quartets he wound up singing with the Evangelist Gospel Singers of Alabama with whom he recorded two singles for Chess in 1951. Months later he moved to Detroit where he met up with lead tenor Isaiah "Lil Shot" Jones, baritone and quartet manager Wilson De Shields and basso Leo Coney. The trio was very much interested in forming a gospel quartet in the style of the Evangelist Gospel Singers. Banks wanted to join and became their lead baritone. Soon Providence Thomas was taken into the fold to complete the quartet. Thomas had sung lead in the Singing Sons alongside the great Rev. Julius Cheeks.

By 1953 Coney had dropped out and first tenor Arthur Lee "Bob" Beatty replaced him. The Violinaires' first sides were recorded in back of Joe Von Battle's record shop on Hastings Street. For some reason, Battle saw fit to lease his recordings to the tiny Drummond label on Detroit's Woodward Avenue. Songs included "Another soldier gone" which became a regional hit and is today a prized item among R&B and gospel vocal group collectors. The single was issued a second time label copied as by the ? (Question Marks) on Jack Lauderdale's Los Angeles-based Swing Time imprint in 1954. An interesting addition to the Drummond is the release of "Walk through the

streets" on the Personal-Choice label. Aurally speaking, the vintage chart sounds very much like a commercially unissued item by the original 1953 line-up. This is pure speculation of course.

The original Violinaires outfit seemed to have had a short life. Oddly enough, Joe Von Battle, who still held the rights to the song "Another soldier gone," chose to recreate it again during the Vietnam era with a group calling themselves the Detroit Motor City Singers backed by Washboard Willie. A ragged-sounding "Another soldier gone" was released on the Von label. This group could possibly be the Violinaires lead by Isaiah Jones before the move to Checker or later during 1965 and the move by the U.S. Marines into South Vietnam. We don't know for certain.

In 1955, Jones, De Shields and Coney decided to cross over and with the addition of Calvin Fair from the L & N Gospel Singers formed a rhythm and blues group called the Gales. The Gales, signed to Battle's J.V.B. label, recorded two releases. The first was top-sided with the novel "My eyes keep me in trouble" and the second gave us the beautiful ballad "Darling Patricia." The Gales had a comic edge and sang as if back in church.

By 1957 Beatty had moved on to the Trumpets of Joy and Banks had taken up residence with the Flying Clouds of Detroit. The Flying Clouds were the longest established and most celebrated quartet in Detroit at this time. The second configuration of the Violinaires, made up partially of returnees, came together in 1957. Now billed as the Violinaires of Detroit, soldiers included tenors Jones (first lead) and Fair plus tenors Robert Gandy and second lead Wilson Pickett. De Shields managed and sang baritone and Coney was back in the basso spot. De Shields had signed a sixmonth contract with Ivin Ballen's Gotham label in Philadelphia in November 1957. The outfit enjoyed one studio session. From the 3 issued songs one can hear the rudimental elements of the high tenor harmonies the group would later perfect.

This group also lasted only a short while with Pickett defecting to R&B and going with the Falcons in 1961 and the departure of Calvin Fair and Robert Gandy.

The third Violinaires outfit of 1964 was thus Jones, De Shields, Coney, James Byers and the new awesome tenor lead of Robert Blair. Blair set the tone of the Violinaires with his heartaching vocals set against a panoply of interweaving falsettos. But this happened after Blair's first lead outing with the group which came about during the spring of 1964 with the release of "Tell mother there will be no separation" on Checker Records. This song, sounding every bit a country gospel-blues throwback to golden gospel times, was first recorded but not released at an earlier date for J.V.C. which would explain its earthier vintage. The backing rhythm section sounds like Washboard Willie and the Suds of Rhythm who were probably recording for Joe Von Battle at the time. All this indicates that Battle probably made a deal with the Chess brothers in Chicago to buy the Violinaires' long-standing contract.

The Violinaires' first studio session at Chess in April / May 1964 did not meet with the label's approval and the results were put on the shelf. Blair, taking over managerial duties, then reshuffled the members in the group to include himself at the helm with Jones, De Shields, Coney and Byers plus the infrequent appearances of Reverends J.C. Smith, William C. Hall and E.L. Fairley. This group recorded as the Violinaires at the Tel Mar Studios in Chicago for their first album "Stand By Me" in February 1965.

By now they had mastered their winning formula with the release of great charts like "Dark Thursday evening," "Coming up through the years" and the studio version of

their 1960s signature opus "Stand by me." Robert Blair and Isaiah Jones continued to lead the group in 1966 and the completion of their second and third albums, "The Fantastic Violinaires" and "I'm Gonna Serve the Lord." These were uplifted with notebending triumphs like "My mother used to hold me," "Three pictures of the Lord" and "I've come too far."

By the time "I'm Gonna Serve the Lord" was cut, the line-up was only slightly altered with Rev. William C. Hall and Rev. E.L. Fairley gone and second tenor Cleofas Tilman added. This line-up survived into 1967 and their fourth album release, "Move On Up," with standouts such as "Mother's last prayer" and "The Zion ship."

Fall 1967 found Jones, Blair and Byers in place with replacements Robert Wilson, second tenor, and tenor James McCurdy. This line-up held up through their next two albums which were November 1967's "Shout" and Spring1968's "Live the Right Way." The Violinaires reached their loftiest peak with the addition of the Rev. Charles Brown in 1968. Brown added even more fire to the excitement generated by Blair and Jones, especially in live performance. Brown was born in Cordell, Georgia and came to the Violinaires only briefly before defecting to the Pilgrim Jubilees.

Brown's debut with the Violinaires on Checker came with his savagely sung version of "That evening sun" on a single. He followed this with his appearance in the group on their live album recorded at Chicago's Du Sable High School on September 1, 1968. This album, entitled "Live in Concert" (the group's seventh collection), is said to be the most exciting Post-War live gospel quartet album ever recorded. This remark came from Johnny Otis which was praise indeed. Only the Mighty Clouds' live album at the Music Hall in Houston recorded less than a year before comes anywhere close to the Violinaires' spirit-killing performance. Both groups battled each other for top dog acclaim during this period which brought back some of the raw excitement generated by live, competing quartets during the 1950s.

After this, the Violinaires recorded three more albums for Checker (excluding their later two Greatest Hits reissues) before leaving Chess in 1971. By 1973, the Violinaires were signed to Stan Lewis's Jewel imprint in Shreveport. The outfit cut seven albums with Jewel, my personal favorite being the first, "The Upper Way," containing such gems as "Lonely soldier" and "Crucifixion."

Their tenure with Jewel came to an end in 1981 at which point the group, having gone from Violinaires to the Fantastic Violinaires featuring Robert Blair, were composed of Blair, background singer Robert Arrington from Rocky Mount, Ash County, North Carolina, lead, and background vocalist Dwight "Tito" Arthur from Cleveland (Arthur had sung in the celebrated Gerald Sisters of Mullins, South Carolina), Pastor Dr. Frank "Daddy" Thompson Jr. from High Point, North Carolina (Thompson also sang lead and background), David Battle, also from Rocky Mount, North Carolina (Battle booked the group and sang background), and the great David "Bunker Hill" Walker who had sung lead with the Mighty Clouds of Joy in 1960-1961. Walker's job was tri-fold. Not only did he sing lead and background, he served as assistant public relations man.

The Fantastic Violinaires spent four years with Malaco beginning in 1983 before switching to Air in 1988. They briefly went over to Paula in 1993 before a short stay with Grammercy, Gospel Jubilee and Universal Music. A brief return to Malaco followed in 2001, then short contracts with Melendo Nu Sound and Bles-sed. They signed for a third stay with Malaco in 2013. Their first 2013 release was a reunited concert album entitled "Live at Richmond, Virginia." The current members included Arthur, Arrington, Battle and Thompson with background vocalist Minister Wesley Hill from Spartanburg,

North Carolina, Rev. Thomas Rhyant, background vocalist and guitar player from Fort Pierce, Florida, Pastor Danny Walker, lead and background singer from West Minister, South Carolina, plus the return of the great lead tenor Rev. Charles Brown whose acquaintanceship with the group dates back to the J.V.B. days when he wrote "Tell mother there will be no separation," the group's first Checker release. However, his return turned out to be fleeting. He unfortunately passed in mid-October 2013 and was laid to rest in Atlanta, Georgia.

Sadly, the great lead tenor Robert Blair died of a heart attack on March 19, 2001. The funeral services took place at the late Rev. C.L. Franklin's Detroit-based New Bethel Baptist Church.

I highly recommend the 1999 Gloryland Gospel videotape of Robert Blair and the Fantastic Violinaires recorded live at the Timberlake Christian Faith Center, Creedmoor, North Carolina. The tape demonstrates that the quartet can as nearly always ignite with fire when the spirit catches them.

-- Opal Louis Nations, March 2014