

THE BEST OF



WILLIE NEAL JOHNSON &
THE GOSPEL KEYNOTES

avi
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The dynamic Gospel Keynotes have had some twenty-odd album releases on Nashboro over the course of the last twenty-five years, and their popularity on gospel programs around the nation has grown steadily. The group was piloted by two vigorous and charismatic leads, the power and preacherly conviction of Willie Neal Johnson and the formidable tenor of Paul Beasley who propelled blends of high tenor harmonies into realms once reached only by The Violinaires of Detroit. Where Robert Blair and The Violinaires took us through the Sixties with their high-end mix of excitement, The Gospel Keynotes extended this use of intense, exaggerated falsetto into



present times.

It all began back in 1964 when tenor Edward James Brumfield, ex-lead and founding member of the once renowned Los Angeles-based Chosen Gospel Singers from 1952 to 1963, teamed up with Willie Neal Johnson with ideas of forming a quartet more in line with present trends. In 1963, Willie Neal Johnson headed up the freshly renamed and short-lived New Chosen Gospel Singers when he and his group out from Tyler, Texas adopted the moniker. By 1963, the old Chosens had more or less gone their separate ways. With Paul Beasley, Johnson and Brumfield had found the basic elements around which

atomic gospel could be made. Other founding Keynotes included the temporary residence of Little Johnny Jones on leave from The Swance Quintet.

The Best of The Gospel Keynotes draws from many of the outfit's album collections. On "Til we meet," a cut culled from the group's second album, Johnson demonstrates how strongly he can get down and testify, while on the delicate "Keynotes Prayer," Beasley souls and soars his way through the infectious melody like a soldier out of uniform. Never was heard such vocal jousting as on "The Little wooden church," based loosely on The Violinaires' arrangement, taken to great heights with much fervor and passion. With "He'll make it right," a mid-tempo song, the group steers the mounting energy through a series of comic melisma and clever falsetto embellishments.

More strong emoting on "Don't wait too long" — double leads, teasing falsetto interjections, and fine keyboard breaks come shining through. A little of the old Fifties style quartet singing is evoked on "My life will be sweeter," a kind of pop-oriented ballad given an effective, close harmony treatment, a hint at how versatile the group can be. "Travelin' on" from the quartet's first album, makes magnificent use

of a supporting brass section. The song builds as each lead strategist tries to outdo the other with vocal pyrotechnics. My personal favorite is "Jesus, you've been good to me" from The Keynotes' fourth album released in 1975. The reading of the song brings out all the group's strongest qualities: tight, sweet, high tenor harmony, strong lead singing, preacherly recitations, and sweeping falsetto ornament. Recommended is Paul Beasley's own solo album "My Story" (AVI 50014.)

The Gospel Keynotes are a premier group who both thrill and excite. Legions of fans everywhere support this notion through the ongoing healthy sales of their many fine recordings.

- Opal Louis Nations
November 1994

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