



O.V. WRIGHT & THE LOCKETT BROTHERS – O.V. WRIGHT – far left

## On Jesus' Program – The Gospel Soul of O.V. Wright

by Opal Louis Nations

Overton Vertis Wright was perhaps one of the finest gospel and soul-blues singers to emerge from out of the Volunteer State. He was born to Emanuel and Helen Wright on October 9, 1939 in Lens, some thirty miles west of Memphis, Tennessee. His first public appearance was made atop a soap box in 1945 at the Temple of Eads. Even then Wright seemed to possess perfect pitch and total control over his voice. By the age of twelve Wright was singing in the choir of the Golden Leaf Baptist Church, pastored by Rev. Hamblin who recognized his talent and encouraged the youngster to pursue a career in gospel music. With older brother Eddie Lewis Wright joined a local gospel group called the 5 Harmonizers. The 5 Harmonizers sang around Memphis and developed a strong local reputation.

In early 1957 they caught the ear of Grover Blake, manager of the Sunset Travelers who ventured out to Mt. Pisgah High where Wright was a student to get him in his group. The Sunset Travelers at this point were composed of Sylvester Ward and Tommy Tucker, tenors, Grover Blake, baritone, and Elijah "Jnr" Franklin, bass, with McKinney Jones on guitar. Back in 1953, with Sammy Lee Dortch as lead, the group had recorded two singles releases for Don Robey's Duke label in Houston. Their

second release sold well and generated multiple engagements across the South, dates the group could not fill as Dortch had too many commitments at home.

Blake wanted to take Wright out of school and onto the road where they could fulfill out of state engagements. Blake took Wright and trained him away from singing in the style of Sam Cooke. Blake encouraged Wright to sing in an emotional vein similar to Rev. Doc Morgan Babb of the Philco Singers. He gave Wright Philco records to listen to. Soon Wright developed a style which utilized melismatic falsetto with sforzando vocal techniques to heighten the emotive effect of his delivery.

Blake and the group took Wright down to WDIA on Union Avenue, where the Sunsets had recorded earlier for Duke, and taped a test pressing of "Sit down and rest." Wright's anguished rendering conveyed how well the fresh recruit was blending with the longer-standing members of the group. After the Sunset road gigs petered out Wright went with the Spirit of Memphis for a few months, but this was only when they needed a substitute soldier to fill in on out-of-town gigs. Wright, always an outgoing type, enjoyed being out on the road.

Toward the close of the 1950s, Wright sang briefly with the Highway Q C's out of Chicago, all this while Wright divided his time between attending S.A. Owens Junior College in Memphis and performing with local gospel quartets like the Harmony Echoes (who had started out as the Southern Wonder Juniors, a "training" outfit for the Southern Wonders themselves) and Rev. E.L. Whitaker and the Jubilee Hummingbirds alongside fellow soul-soldier and friend James Carr. (Carr recorded with the Jubilee Hummingbirds as late as 1995.)

Around Christmas 1959 Wright recorded the spiritual ballad "Lazarus" with the Sunset Travelers for Peacock Records. This was truly an impressive debut for Wright as he laid on every "trickeration" in the gospel soloist's handbook. At this point, the Sunsets had switched personnel quite a bit. Ward, Tucker, Franklin and Jones were gone. Clyde Beyers (or Johnny Frierson), Robert Lewis, Daniel Scott and lead soloist Rev. Jeff Brown had replaced them. "Lazarus" was followed by "You are blessed" in early 1962. The poignant "Nobody knows" (the trouble I see) and "Glory is coming" were released later that same year.

Just before the release of his soul-gospel classic, "Blind Bartemaeus" during the spring of 1964, Wright befriended Roosevelt Jamison. Jamison worked for the City of Memphis Hospital and doubled at the Interstate blood bank unit at Beale and Fourth. Jamison had taken on the management of the Redemption Harmonizers, Harmony Echoes and Sunset Travelers. he rehearsed his quartets at the back of the blood bank. Wright, who was working during the week on a garbage truck, would toil on his gospel songs at the blood bank while Jamison carried out his lab work. The pair got to know each other really well.

Then Roosevelt and Wright decided to make a bid for commercial success and came up (with Steve Cropper's help) with a deep-soul ballad entitled "That's how strong my love is" which surfaced on Gold Wax Records later in 1964. Unfortunately, Wright's version was eclipsed by Otis Redding's inferior cover which shot up the charts the following January. When Wright and the Sunsets recorded their only album, "On Jesus' Program" (PLP 122) for Peacock in Houston in late 1964, Wright was persuaded by Don Robey to try his hand at making a more lucrative living singing Rhythm & Blues music. A contract was drawn up, and Wright signed with Robey's Back Beat subsidiary whereon he enjoyed a dozen or so charted releases before signing with Hi Records in 1976 on which he continued to make best-sellers. Wright sang lead on two of the cuts included on the Sunset's 1964 Peacock album, the movingly beautiful "On Jesus'

Program” and the upbeat “Another day lost.” Rev. Jeff Brown took the spotlight on most of the remaining charts.

Just over a year after Wright’s last soul best-seller slipped off the R & B charts, he was charged with stealing a woman’s purse and cashing a forged check at a nearby Safeways. Wright drove the getaway car. All of his associates were habitual criminals. Wright was eventually put on probation. He now had become addicted to heroin, and his life was out of control. Suffering from a heart condition (he had had major heart surgery), Wright was forced to choose between singing and the rigors of the chitlin circuit or drugs and certain death. Feeling he could no longer go out and meet the demands put on an extremely visible soul singer, he chose the less strenuous, less lucrative path of singing the gospel.

After hearing the Luckett Brothers of Milwaukee at a local concert, Wright decided to again cut religious recordings and have the group background him. The Luckett Brothers were James, lead, Eddie, Aaron and William with L.C. who doubled on guitar. In October 1980, Wright and the Lucketts recorded their “Four & Twenty Elders” album at the Woodland Sound Studios in Nashville for Creed Records (3104), a subsidiary of Nashboro. The collection contained nine songs, four of which were lead by Wright.

With Shannon Williams at the controls, Wright delivered on “Give an account,” “He’ll understand,” “Four & Twenty Elders” and “Stand up and testify.” These were his last recordings. Just one month after the session on Sunday, November 16, 1980, Wright died of heart failure at Providence Hospital in Mobile. He was only forty-one. “Four & 20 Elders” was released two months later.

The Sunset Travelers still sing around Memphis now and again, although membership has changed drastically. The Luckett Brothers disbanded in 1988, after James suffered a serious accident which resulted in him being unable to travel. Back in the early Memphis gospel days, Jamison recalls, Wright was devoted to singing. He was a perfectionist and always made sure each note was absolutely right. It is with this thought that we invite you to listen to O.V. Wright at his very best.

— Opal Louis Nations  
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### **Sources of Information:**

1. Lost in the Shuffle, The O.V. Wright Story - Jeff Colburn, Goldmine Magazine, October 16, 1992
2. Liner notes to “The Essential James Carr” - Colin Escott, Razor & Tie CD 2060 (1995)
3. Liner notes to “Raisin’ the roof” by Ray Funk - Mobile Fidelity double CD 2-760 (1992)
4. Sweet Soul Music - Peter Guralnick - Harper & Row (1986)
5. Happy in the Service of the Lord - Kip Lornell - Univ. of Illinois Press (1988)
6. Duke/Peacock Records - Galen Gart / Roy C. Ames - Big Nickel Publications (1990)

## O.V. Wright - Playlist

### With The Sunset Travelers

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|--|-------------------------------|
| 1. Sit down and rest<br>(other songs may exist?)   | WDIA - Test (1957)            |
| 2. Lazarus   | Peacock 1816 (1962)           |
| 3. You are blessed                                 | Peacock 1848 (1963)           |
| 4. Nobody knows (the trouble I see)                | Peacock 1888 (1963)           |
| 5. Glory is coming                                 | Peacock 1888 (1963)           |
| 6. Blind Bartemaeus                                | Peacock 3014 (1964)           |
| 7. On Jesus' program                               | PLP 122 & Peacock 3039 (1964) |
| 8. Another day lost<br>plus alternates & outtakes? | PLP 122 & Peacock 3039 (1964) |

### With The Lockett Brothers

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|--|----------------------|
| 9. Give an account                                       | Creed LP 3104 (1981) |
| 10. He'll understand                                     | Creed LP 3104 (1981) |
| 11. Four & twenty elders                                 | Creed LP 3104 91981) |
| 12. Stand up and testify<br>plus alternates and outtakes | Creed LP 3104 (1981) |