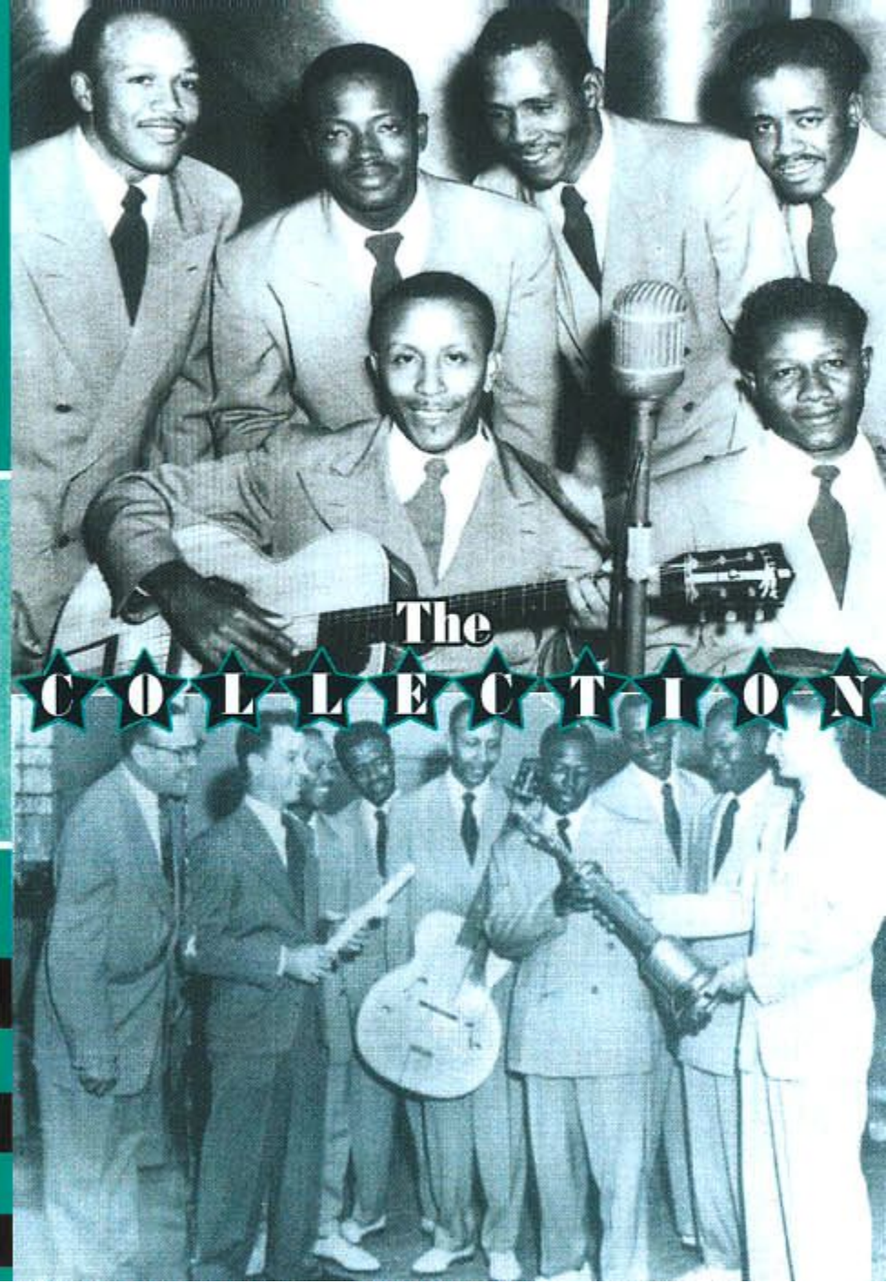
A.C.Littlefield, Ester Littlefield, Clem Reed, Vernon Maynor, A.D.Watson, Namon Brown (vocals) ; Unk drums
c. October 1951 – April 1952 – May 1953 – June 1953 – March 1954

1. I'LL WORK LORD PEACOCK 1584 (Littlefield-Robey)
2. LET'S TALK ABOUT JESUS (Littlefield-Robey)
3. HE'S MY FRIEND PEACOCK 1700 (Littlefield-Robey)
4. STOP RIGHT NOW ITS PRAYING TIME (Littlefield-Robey)
5. ECHOES FROM HEAVEN PEACOCK 1708 (Littlefield)
6. LEAK IN THIS OLD BUILDING (Littlefield)
7. HOW SWEET IT IS PEACOCK 1716 (Littlefield)
8. I'M GONNA PRESS ON (Littlefield)
9. NEVER LET IT BE SAID TOO LATE PEACOCK 1726 (Littlefield)
10. WELL WELL NO NO NO (Littlefield)
11. IT WILL SOON BE OVER PEACOCK 1738 (Littlefield)
12. SINCE JESUS CHANGED THIS HEART OF MINE (Littlefield)
13. DO LORD REMEMBER ME *NOT ISSUED* (Littlefield)
14. EVERY DAY AND EVERY HOUR . *NOT ISSUED* (Walker)
15. FARE YE WELL *NOT ISSUED* (Littlefield)
16. GLORY BE TO GOD *NOT ISSUED* (Littlefield)
17. NO MORE SORROW *NOT ISSUED* (Littlefield)
18. THE LORD AND I *NOT ISSUED* (Littlefield)
19. THERE'S A HAND LEADING ME *NOT ISSUED* (Tharpe)
20. WHEN MY SAVIOUR COMES *NOT ISSUED* (Littlefield)

THE BELLS OF JOY


The
COLLECTION

Afro-American blues & gospel never truly made a significant impact on the cultural development of Austin until after World War II when small, indie record labels based in Houston and Dallas set out on forays into central Texas to record indigenous talent. Austin with its small black population was for the most part known for its black fiddle and barrelhouse piano players. However, emerging troubadouring gospel quartets like Rev. W.L. LaBeaux and the 5 Soul Stirrers of Houston cut their first commercially available sides in Austin in 1936.

There is no doubt the 5 Soul Stirrers inspired other wannabe quartet singers in the Central Texas area. This would have included the Littlefield brothers, A.C. and Ester. A.C., like his younger brother, was born to Willie and George Littlefield, country folk, in Sealy, Austin County, West of Houston. His birth date was January 16, 1925. Poor prevailing economic conditions lead to a family move to Austin in 1938. After several attendances at various parishes, the Littlefields ended up in the flock of the New Mt. Olive Baptist Church on East Eleventh Street in Austin. Both A.C. and Ester served in the Army during World War II and both received honourable discharges.

Over the 1947-48 period, A.C. and Ester joined the Starlight Singers sponsored by Rev. H.A. Sneed at the New Mt. Olive Baptist. The Starlights were said to have been inspired by the original unrecorded Paramount Singers, whose members later moved to San Francisco where they reinvented themselves around Archie Reynolds. Other members of the original Starlights are unknown. A.C. married Johnnie Mae Sorells, a childhood sweetheart, in 1954. They bore a son who sadly passed in infancy.

Ester G. Littlefield was born March 10, 1927. At just about the time the Littlefields joined the Starlights, Lavada "Dr. Hepcat" Durst became the first black jive-talking deejay in Austin, having secured for himself a blues and gospel radio show over Austin's KVET. Durst became a pivotal and key figure in the Bells of Joy saga. The colourful Lavada Durst was born January 9, 1913. Ray Topping calls Durst an impressive barrel-house and boogie pianist in the Texan style, schooled by the legendary Robert Shaw whose rapid, syncopated piano riffs filled the local juke joints.

Durst often snuck into the New Mt. Olive Baptist Church to practice piano between services. It was here Durst probably encountered the Starlight Quartet in rehearsal. Being representatives of the church's religious outreach activities, the Starlights' ambitions were probably limited to playing on weekends around the local Baptist circuit.

Durst, like the group, was also a member of the church. (During the 1970s he served as associate minister of the New Mt. Olive under Rev. Lawrence Wicks.) Fred Caldwell was program director at KVET during the late 1940s and ran the tiny Uptown label in

Austin. Caldwell recorded two records on Durst in late 1949 (one labelled as Cool Papa Smith.) Durst took an interest in the Starlights, wrote songs for them featured them on his show and generally brought them along. By now he had found a new "radio" name for them - The Bells of Joy.

In 1950 Durst contacted Don Robey at Peacock Records, a fledgling new indie in Houston, with the idea of recording for him. Durst had played at Robey's nightclub, the Bronze Peacock, so Robey was more than familiar with Durst's work. Durst wound up re-recording his first Uptown opus, "Hattie Green," for Peacock in February 1950. Five months later, Robey ventured into gospel music by recording sides by the Original Five Blind Boys of Mississippi (see ADD 3003).

Fifteen months after this, Durst was on his way to Houston with the Bells of Joy in tow. He had penned a number of songs for the group and was eager to get them a contract with Peacock Records. Although Durst was a street performer and outwardly not exactly a straight, strict Christian, he attended church, kept the faith and genuinely felt a passion for gospel music. However, because he had built a reputation as a blues singer and pianist, he did not want to jeopardize this by having people think that he had become a gospel songwriter for the Bells of Joy. He later insisted on not having his name mentioned on the early label credits, a decision he bitterly regretted down the line when the group's initial release hit the jackpot and A.C. Littlefield contested authorship.

With a contract signed, the Bells of Joy entered Bill Holford's Houston-based ACA recording studios for their first session in October 1951. The line-up by this time included A.C. Littlefield, lead tenor, Clem (Clemmons) J. Reed, second lead tenor, Ester Littlefield, who served as manager as well as tenor singer, Vernon E. Maynor, A.D. Watson, and guitarist Namon Brown. Clem J. Reed was born April 23, 1922 in Caldwell County, Texas. Vernon E. Maynor was born August 25, 1932 in Washington, D.C. (his place of birth is not fully confirmed.) A.D. Watson was born in Austin on September 30, 1930. Namon Brown was also an Austinite, born March 16, 1918.

Durst sat out on this session and an un-identified drummer was used. The Bells of Joy were the third gospel act signed and the first Peacock gospel outfit to use both guitar and drums to stress rhythm. Four songs emerged from this first session, the infectious, mid-tempoed "Let's talk about

Jesus," and the dirge-like "I'll work Lord," issued only weeks before the Christmas season of 1951, plus the sorrowfully beautiful "He's my friend," issued May 1952, and the lively "Leak in this old building," shelved for release in January 1953.

As Prof. Horace Boyer describes in his book "How Sweet The Sound" (Elliott & Clark, 1995), the Bells of Joy personified the changing quartet sound. The jubilee style, with emphasis on harmony, attacks, and releases, time and tune was replaced by much louder singing, broader vocal range and more rapid tempo. The addition of drum and guitar heightened a distinctive, rhythmical call and response counterpoint. Both A.C. and Clem Reed worked this to perfection.

"Let's talk about Jesus" began to take off in January 1952. A month later, Atlanta and New Orleans were touting it as a regional best seller, having topped 26,000 copies.

The Bells of Joy's second session of April 1952 gave us the rightful May 1952 follow-up to "Let's talk about Jesus" with "Stop right now, it's praying time," a vehicle in the former mode. The unissued "Seal on my soul" and "Hast thou forsaken me" were committed to tape plus "Echoes From Heaven" issued in January 1953 and featuring Vernon Maynor as third lead for the first time. The rapid, moving "Well, well, no no no" was also taped at this time and put out in April 1954.

Five other charts were recorded on this date. All were shelved until 1988 when the Japanese P-Vine label issued them (7501.) These were the irresistible "Lord and I" with its harmonic complexity, the prayerful "When my Saviour comes," the foot-warming "Fare ye well," the tear-stained "No more sorrow" and the wailing "Every day and every hour" which makes full use of the swing lead technique. Threats and arguments kept Lavada Durst out of Don Robey's office and, as things went, out of further dealings with the Bells of Joy.

By May 1952 the Bells of Joy were awarded the outstanding achievement trophy by Cashbox Magazine. The prize was given, with the smiling Don Robey present, at the Two Wings Chapel in New Orleans. The group appeared on the cover of the May 3rd Cashbox Magazine issue. "Let's Talk About Jesus" was touted as having sold close to a million copies, outselling Clara Ward's "Come In The Room." In March of that same year, Sister Rosetta Tharpe with the Southwinds waxed a cover for Decca in the hope of picking up a piece of the action.

Robey set up a nationwide tour for the Bells of Joy, but the group was not prepared for instant acclaim and did not want to abandon jobs and family to go out on the road and risk an uncertain future. They were quite happy playing the local Baptist circuit and appearing on local radio every once in a while. Only A.C. Littlefield showed any willingness to tour and this only after

having to combat Peacock's pressure on him to cross over into singing pop music.

Robey solved the problem of being able to fill public appearances by having the Southern Tones go out in their place. A.C. Littlefield and the Southern Tones would now become the Bells of Joy both on the road and in the studio. The new line-up became A.C. Littlefield and Robert Dawkins, first and second leads, Rev. W.L. Richardson, James Dawkins plus Bob King, vocals and guitar. Sales of "Let's Talk About Jesus" peaked in June 1952, when Mahalia Jackson's "In the upper room" (Parts 1 & 2) looked like becoming a hot seller.

In August 1952, just as Johnny Ace's release of "My Song" looked like becoming a major hit, Robey and Irving Marcus switched promotional attention away from the Bells of Joy and onto the crooning heartthrob. "Stop Right Now," the Bells of Joy's follow-up, sold well at churches and auditoriums. By this point the Bells of Joy were going out on programs with the Sensational Nightingales who were hot but had not yet proved themselves a saleable item.

The Bells of Joy toured for the better part of the year on the strength of "Let's Talk About Jesus." They were back in the studio in May 1953 to record the haunting "How sweet it is" with the soulful Robert Dawkins on lead. The underside gave us "I'm gonna press on," a plaintive dirge cleffing by A.C. with the usual measure of anguish. A month later they recorded the funereal "It will soon be over" and the beautiful "Never let it be said too late" with A.C.'s short but sweet narration.

As 1953 was coming to an end, the Bells of Joy continued to play the one-nighter circuit with Sister Jessie Mae Renfro who needed a boost and had not recorded in over a year. Once off the road, the Bells of Joy pretenders were able to record under their own name—The Southern Tones (see ACR 129 - Texas Gospel, Vol. 1) for Duke. The Southern Tones were a fine quartet who should have waxed more often than the two Duke sessions dated January 1954 and June 1955. As the Bells of Joy, they cut the heavily chanted "Since Jesus changed this heart of mine" in March 1954 and had to wait nine months before the song's release.

By August 1955 Vernon Maynor, an original Bells of Joy soldier, had returned to the group. The August 1955 session turned out to be the Bells of Joy's last session. Of the ten known songs committed to tape, only two saw light of day in January 1956. These were the plaintive "Just Jesus" with its pumping bass percussion and the dual tempo "Doing for Jesus." The remaining eight songs appeared on P-Vine LP 7501 in 1988. Although "Just Jesus" / "Doing for Jesus" was bestowed an excellent four-star review in Billboard, it did not sell as well as expected. The phenomenal success of black R&B platters forced smaller retail record outlets to cut stocks of gospel product which would otherwise constitute

a larger slice of the profits. Because R&B wax was increasingly responsible for a faster turnover, religious recordings, which sold over a longer period of time, suffered.

The Southern Tones' configuration of the Bells of Joy quit recording after two releases for E.J. Henke's San Antonio-based Wildcat label in mid-1955. The Southern Tones themselves, after two sessions with Duke and one for Herb Slotkin's Philly-based Grand imprint, ceased to record.

In the early part of 1960, A.C. Littlefield together with new and original members of the old Bells of Joy signed with Chess Records who released one album and one single on the group. Disenchanted with the way they were being handled by the label, the outfit switched to Ernie Young's Nashboro Records where they enjoyed a five-year relationship before calling it quits.

The Southern Tones with a whole new line-up cut one final session in 1961 for the Houston-based Myrl label. Lead chores were conducted by Chosen Gospel Singers' head man Edward James Brunfield who returned to the Chosens following this one Myrl session. Of the original Bells of Joy quartet, only A.D. Watson is believed to be alive today and said to be living in Austin.

The Bells of Joy were criticized by many professional quartets at the time for being "one hit wonders" which is an unfair statement to make. The Bells of Joy created a straight forward, rhythmic, almost hypnotic base on which they built lilting, ethereal, unadorned songs chanted with passion and joy in a simple, direct and convincing way.

In June 1991, the original Bells of Joy were honoured with an appearance at the Texas Festival at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. In September 1998, A.C. and A.D. Watson, together with freshly enlisted Bells of Joy Alton Cyphers, Edward Dennon, J.T. Steward, Al Brown, Willis Littlefield and Lena Thomas cut a CD for Austin's Dialtone Records entitled "The Second Time Around." Former memories were revived and old songs given a new lease on life.

Opal Louis Nations *February 2005*

Acknowledgements: First Pressings - Galen Gart (Big Nickel Publications)