

The Blues Goes To Church In Northampton County

The Story of Bishop Manning And His Family

by Opal Louis Nations



The Happy Gospel Singers of Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina, 1960s with Bishop Manning and Sister Marie Manning.

When I first caught the front porch gospel singing of Bishop Manning, I thought I was listening to Slim Harpo singing and playing in some old country church in the Southlands. But no, my ears had caught the music of a man who grew up poor and hungry on a sharecropping farm near the North Carolina-West Virginia border where during the early part of the twentieth century roaming troubadour blues musicians such as Blind Boy Fuller, Curly Weaver and Buddy Moss came to play on their way south to Raleigh and Greenville. The music left its mark on the rural communities of Northampton County, and the Manning family was no exception.

Dready Louis Manning was born in August 1935 in the town of Gaston near Roanoke Rapids. Folks there about were sharecroppers who owed allegiance to Silus Allen, a tough-minded 'manager' who took the rent and made sure nothing more was given out than seed to plant in the spring and a supply of meat to keep the sharecroppers out in the fields to pick cotton and raise corn and peanuts. Dready's mother, Janie Neal Manning, died shortly after childbirth and his father passed when Dready was eight. Dready was given into the care of Aunt Maggie Magnum while his twin brother Freddie Cornelius was raised by their grandmother.





Dready had three uncles who were bitten by the aforementioned 'blues-bug' coming down from West Virginia. Burnie, Junius and Jesse Magnum all played blues guitar with some proficiency. The family was Baptist but not regular church goers. One of Dready's first memorable musical experiences was listening to the 'Boone County Jamboree' programme over WLW, the 50,000 watt clear channel out of Cincinnati and being taken by Merle Travis's performance of 'I Am A Pilgrim' supported by The Drifting Pioneers.

He also caught The Golden Gate quartet on NBC and The Swan Silvertones airing over the powerful WDIB out of Knoxville. But most of all, young Dready was taken by the prevailing preponderance of the local and regional blues as played by his uncles and recordings brought home by older members of the family, sides by such artists as Blind Boy Fuller and Lightnin' Hopkins. Dready took to the guitar and had cousin 'Dock' Magnum show him a few chords. Being a big fan of local blues guitar hero Russell Moody, Dready persuaded him to give him lessons. Dready practiced and practiced and finally got so good at finger picking he could out-play his tutor. To keep the family fed, Dready bootlegged beer and White Lightning around the county.

He also frequented piccolo joints and gaming houses seeking pleasure in life. Dready got together with his uncles and played up a storm at weekend parties which were riotous events that help lighten a tiring work week. House parties got out of hand when the bootleg whiskey and homemade elderberry or blackberry wine was passed around. The celebration lasted all through the night, culminating with a spell in jail for some. Mondays were spent in recovery.

Dready's guitar playing got so good that he teamed up with harmonica player Theodore Short and traveled around the county, appearing at house parties and other not so inviting venues to make a buck. Short was a member of the Holiness Church. Later, Dready acquired a menial kind of job working for a car mechanic, punching tyres off of wheels with a hammer. The boss was an amiable man who sympathized with the need to let loose on weekends and the Monday 'dry-outs'. Dready met his Baptist wife Marie in the 1950s and the couple was soon married in Gaston. They raised six children over a lengthy period: Clara Marie, Carolyn Lee, Joyce Elaine, Dready Paul, Zacchaeus Earl and Marquis.

Dready Manning's pivotal moment, one which gave meaning to his life, came during a hot July Monday in 1962. Riotous partying and carrying on had filled the weekend. He was suddenly stricken by a mysterious haemorrhage in his sinuses. Nothing could staunch the blood. Nobody knew what to do. There were no affordable doctors. Theodore Short said he had the answer—he would bring a group of Holiness believers from his church and their prayers would help him get well. At first, Dready would not have anything to do with a bunch of 'hoodoo' practitioners but things were getting worse and something had to be done. Dready was persuaded and a group of Short's friends from the New Jerusalem Holiness Church in Garysburg, North Carolina came and prayed over the bleeding patient. In the presence of his family, Dready's bleeding stopped almost at once. Dready said he knew that God had intervened and had worked a miracle. He vowed never to sing the blues again (although he would demonstrate he knew how to sing a blues if he was asked to play a blues song in a concert.)

Dready recovered so rapidly he was back punching tyres without ill effect by Wednesday morning. The house parties stopped and the Manning family converted to the Holiness denomination. Dready threw out two gallons of

moonshine and forty seven cans of beer ended up in the fishpond. In 1965 he took up harmonica playing and listening to the recordings of Jimmy Reed and Sonny Boy Williamson. With help from his uncles, Dready was one of the few rural musicians to carry Southeastern country blues guitar playing over into gospel song. He also rearranged blues and gospel songs to suit his own down-home style. He augmented this conversion with his lyrics which, because of illiteracy, he sung into a tape recording machine.

Dready has more or less kept to this somewhat traditional, earthy style throughout his commercial recording career which commenced soon after the Manning family had developed their own home grown sound during the early 1970s. After Dready's ordainment, the family relocated to Roanoke Rapids in 1968. Shortly after the move, Dready founded St. Mark Holiness Church in Roanoke Rapids where he set out to make a joyful noise unto the Lord with his full throated, born again singing and finger picking guitar. Bishop Manning and Sister Marie first founded a mixed singing group called The Happy Gospel Singers of Roanoke but they did not stay together for very long. Months later, he got into rehearsing gospel songs with his family.

He started with his youngest son, Zacchaeus Earl. The three year old Zacchaeus was given lessons on lead guitar. Then Bishop Manning started out his four-year-old son Dready Paul Manning. Dready Paul was ascribed bass guitar. His youngest daughter, Joyce Elaine, received her first singing lessons at age eight. Middle daughter Carolyn Lee, aged eleven, also received singing lessons. Oldest daughter, Clara Marie aged twelve, took to the organ while their mother, the thirty four year old Sister Marie, kept time on tambourine. The most recent addition to the family is drummer Marquis Manning. The clan stuck strictly to the music of the church. Now and again one of the children would step up to the mike to proffer a solo. Like the Staple Singers, the Manning Family practiced around the hearth of an evening. Both Dready Paul and Zacchaeus Earl are now successful professional guitar players.

On alternate Sundays Bishop Manning officiates at The Scotland Neck's St. Mark Mission, a second church founded by Dready. He currently hosts an ongoing weekly gospel radio show on WSMY and is a regular on WNVN television. His broadcasting career started out almost at the beginning of the singing family's career, after only thirty days of instruction. Their first program was on WSMY in Weldon, North Carolina. They generated many regular requests to travel and concertize in other parts of the state. A year later, they switched to WCBT in Roanoke Rapids. The Bishop also built his own recording studio where many of his own songs were committed to tape.

Dready says his first sides were waxed for the Memorial label in 1976 and 1977. Others think that his Su-Ann sides recorded by himself at studios in Bailey, North Carolina, preceded these. The Su-Ann label was proprietored by Hoyt Sullivan out of Nashville. Dready sent sides to Sullivan, with whom he had no physical contract. Sullivan issued them but never paid Dready for anything.

He knew for sure some of his songs enjoyed airplay and that Sullivan cheated him out of royalties. Sullivan issued one 45 and one vinyl album entitled 'Manning's Gospel Train'. Music on Dready's own labels – Memorial, Manning, B.L.M., Nashbrand and Peacock, were cut at various studios around North Carolina. Dready has performed across the Carolinas, at the Bull Durham Blues Festival and for a BBC documentary history on gospel music. He received the North Carolina Heritage Award in 2003. Dready likes to point out that he is available for festivals for a modest fee (travel expenses additional.) Interested parties should contact him by calling his office number: 252-537-8228. Bishop Manning is a great and rare talent.



Manning Family Group circa 1968. With Zacchaeus Earl Manning, aged 3 on lead guitar; Dready Paul Manning, age 4 on bass guitar; Joyce Elaine Manning, age 8; vocalist, Bishop Manning (real name Dready Lewis Manning) on guitar; Sister Marie Manning, age 34, background with tambourine; Carolyn Lee Manning, age 11, sitting in the rear and Clara Marie Manning, age 12, at the organ.



The Manning Family Group.



The Manning Family Group.

The Recordings: – 'Converted Mind' – The Early Recordings – Jake Works 1750 (2008)

This undeniably earthy set of his first sides from the early to late 1970s kicks off with the 'Manning Family Theme' a short, loping opener to most of the family's programs. 'Back In St. Matthew's Days' based on Charles Johnson's 'Its Gonna Rain' rocks along in Hightower Brothers' fashion. In fact, the Manning siblings' urgent treatment is very close to the Hightower sound 'I Am A Pilgrim' of course, is Dready's cherished favourite, having heard Merle Travis sing it on his radio programme as a child. 'The Jealous Men And The Jealous Women' is another homespun homily about intolerance and infidelity. The catchy 'Help All The People Everywhere' is the Bishop's prayer for the sick and the helpless. The Bishop intersperses his verses with some tasty front-porch harmonica. Next comes his radio programme's closing song, 'Going Off Theme' followed by the Biblical story of 'Brother John' (John the Baptist). 'Don't Let Satan Ride' is a dragged-out blues that allows the Bishop to stretch out on the frets. This song quite

easily passes for a stone-solid country blues.

The Bishop's rendering of 'The Gospel Train' is downright fabulous, pumping his harmonica like a steam locomotive, as if Sonny Terry had come up from Greensboro to haunt him. Terry was certainly a strong influence on the Bishop's way around the reeds. This is followed by the funky but fine 'What The People Gonna Do' which, of course, is the Bishop's take on the cautionary 'I Don't Know What The World Is Coming To'.

Sister Marie Manning steps up to the plate to render a jumping 'Information Long Distance', a jazzy reworking of the Mighty Clouds of Joy's arrangement of 'Call Him Up'. The Bishop's version of the oft-sung 'People Don't Pray Like They Used To Pray' is played with more potency than is usual, affording the Bishop license to sermonize on the bridge. 'This Is Everybody's Song' or a second stab at 'I Don't Know What The World Is Coming To' concerns the continuing problem of man's moral degeneracy.

Sister Marie Manning returns to a screaming rendition of '(You Can) Talk About Me' that if sung in concert must surely have brought the house down. 'What They Gonna Do' is the original version of 'What The People Gonna Do' and is, to my mind, a much more clearly defined and pleasing version. 'The Last Step' is of course Oatman and Mark's 'Last Mile Of The Way' sung convincingly in the Bishop's grits and cornbread fashion, one of the best stand-out songs on the set.

Country and Western guitar playing permeates an unusual version of the old Lillian Bowles' Baptist hymn 'If You Miss Me From Singing Down Here'. 'I Wanna Thank You Jesus' is an excuse to show the world how well his sons can play bass and lead guitar, and they do not disappoint. 'Something Inside Of Me' is a similar composition given sanctification and the signature tighten up feel. 'Back In Slavery Days' is a discourse on the black people's struggle. Carolyn Manning leads on the bluesy 'Count Off Your Deeds' a song about man's evil ways and need of redemption. Little Paul Manning steps into the spotlight on a tough reading of the pew-burning (I Know) 'You've Been Good To Me' with the family in fervent support.

'You Don't Know What I've Been Through' is yet another but more urgent and sanctified variation of 'You Don't Know What The World Is Coming To'. 'I Thank You Jesus For Another Birthday' is one more novel and original upbeat chart mired only by a lack of melody. 'I Want To Shout At The Meeting' is a pleasant adaptation of Charles Johnson's soulful 'At The Meeting' first recorded by the Sensational Nightingales in 1970. The CD closes with a deep bluesy rendition of 'Somebody's Calling My Name' one of the Manning Family's most persuasive and effective efforts.

Bishop Manning's first fully self produced CD collection surfaced in 1996 on Manning Records ('Take One Moment At A Time' – Manning 9460.) This short, eight song collection is sung by only five members of the Manning clan (see discography.) Stylistically, the set has a professional, more polished sound to it. Gone is the down-home country feel, but the songs and instrumental accompaniment are good and the harmonies pitch perfect.

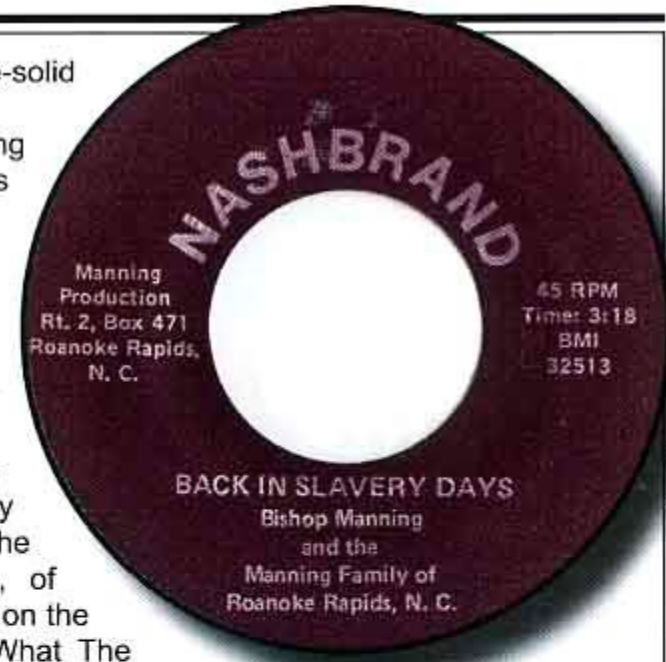
The Bishop's second CD showed up in 2005. This one, 'Gospel Train' (Music Maker 67) was fully financed by The North Carolina Arts Council on a non-profit label dedicated to the support of the forgotten heroes of the North Carolina blues and gospel music traditions.

'Gospel Train' features just four of the Manning tribe (see discography for details) and finds the family back in a more countrified culture. The Bishop plays hollow-bodied acoustic guitar and harp and follows tradition in keeping with the Piedmont style. This eighteen-song collection is a must for anyone interested in the country blues and gospel traditions of North Carolina's Halifax and Northampton counties. Go to www.musicmaker.org to get yourself a copy.

The Bishop has just recently switched to DVD production in full support of prevailing commercial trends. The first DVD, a visual record of his April 23rd, 2003 concert on which Bishop Dready Manning Day is celebrated annually (since 2000) at St. Mark's Holiness Church in Roanoke Falls with the mayor in attendance. Aside from the odd gospel-blues song from the Bishop, guests come up, sing and pay their respects. At one point, the Bishop trades hot harmonica licks with a friend of long standing. The DVD is available through Bishop Manning at 252-537-8228. Bishop Manning is gaining renown by the day. Hopefully it won't be long before we see him on extensive tours of Europe and elsewhere.

With thanks to Bishop Dready Manning for his time and patience to help put this article together and to John Glassburner for sharing his interview notes and for all label shots. All photographs courtesy Bishop Dready Manning.

Big Legal Mess Records will be issuing a Bishop Manning compilation CD this Spring.



Bishop Manning and The Manning Family Discography

By John Glassburner and Opal Louis Nations



The Manning Family Group.

These recordings commence around 1971 – but exact dates uncertain.

Personnel: Clara Marie, Carolyn Lee, Joyce Elaine, Dready Paul, Zacchaeus Earl, Sister Marie and Bishop Dready L. Manning

This Is Everybody's Song	Su-Ann SA766
The People Don't Pray Like They Used To Pray	Su-Ann SA766
'Manning's Gospel Train' - LP	
Manning Family Theme Song	Su-Ann SA1750
Back In St. Matthew Days	Su-Ann SA1750
I Am A Pilgrim	Su-Ann SA1750
The Jealous Men And The Jealous Women	Su-Ann SA1750
Help All The People Everywhere	Su-Ann SA1750
Going Off Theme	Su-Ann SA1750
The Lord Sent Brother John	Su-Ann SA1750
Don't Let Satan Ride	Su-Ann SA1750
The Gospel Train	Su-Ann SA1750
What The People Gonna Do	Su-Ann SA1750
Information Long Distance	Su-Ann SA1750
The People Don't Pray Like They Used To Pray	Su-Ann SA1750
I'm A Pilgrim And A Stranger	Manning Big Sound 35611
The Jealous Men And The Jealous Women	Manning Big Sound 35612
Talk About Me	Manning SO 12996
What They Gonna Do	Manning SO 12997
The Last Step	Manning SO 12998
If You Miss Me	Manning SO 12999
I Wanna Thank You Jesus	B.L.M. 4139
Something Inside Of Me	B.L.M. 41394
Back In Slavery Days	Nashbrand 32513
Count Of Your Deeds (Carolyn Manning)	Nashbrand 32514
I Know You Been Good To Me [(Little) Paul Manning -10 Years Old] (c. 1974)	Peatock 33189
Help All The People's Everywhere	Peatock 33190*
You Don't Know What I've Been Through (1976)	Memorial 29
I Thank You Jesus For Another Birthday (1976)	Memorial 29
I Want To Shout At The Meeting (1977)	Memorial 35
Somebody Is Calling My Name (1977)	Memorial 35

* All except Peatock 33190 are reissued on Jake Works CD 1750, 'Converted Mind' (Private Pressing, 2008)

'Take One Moment At A Time' CD – Manning Records 9460 (1996)

Personnel: Vocals: Carolyn Boyd (Manning), Sister Marie, Paul, Zachery (Zacchaeus) and Bishop Manning

Instruments: Carolyn's husband Frederick, drums; Paul, lead guitar; Bishop Manning, bass, and Zacchaeus, harp

Take One Moment At A Time
What I Got
Jesus Brought My Medicine In My Room
My Lord Is Blessing Me
I Know A Man Upstairs
Don't Let The Devil Ride
You Got To Move (When The Lord Is Ready)
Stop Lying To Yourself

Bishop Dready Manning Day on April 23 in The City of Roanoke Rapids – DVD (Un-numbered, 2003)

Get Ready, So You Better Get Right
Somebody Here
What Was I Doing When The Saints Of God Found Me
Gospel Train
Plus guest appearances and tributes from the mayor, male and female soloists and groups

'Gospel Train' – CD* Music Maker 67 (2005)

*Title track also on a previous compilation with various artists – Music Maker 702 (1999)

Personnel: Bishop Dready L. Manning, vocal, guitar and harp; Sister Marie Manning, vocal, Zacchaeus Manning, piano, Marquis Manning, drums

What Was I Doing, When the Saints Of God Found Me?
Gospel Train
Hard Headed Children
Don't Let The Devil Ride
Go Ahead Satan And Leave Me Alone
When The Lord Gets Ready
Joy That I Have
Glory, Glory
People Don't Pray
Search Me Lord
I Am A Pilgrim
Where Could I Go But To The Lord?
Sit Down Servant
Blind Barnabas
I Ain't Going To Let That Old Devil Ride
Hard Luck And Trouble
Say Amen
Something On The Inside

The above CD is available from The Music Maker Relief Foundation, an organization set up to provide necessary funds for musicians surviving on social security payments. See also a short music selection on YouTube (09/08).

The above discography is incomplete due to Bishop Manning's inability to remember all of his recordings.



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