A Gospel legend active his entire career in the Washington, DC area, this CD presents Bishop Samuel Kelsey with his choir as recorded at a live church service. Recorded in 1965, it was only released in Europe and fewer than 1,000 LPs were ever manufactured.

The item was withdrawn from circulation shortly after its initial release and is now proudly presented by Cohn DeSilva Entertainment for the first time in forty years!

—Lawrence Cohn
CEO, American Odeon/Cohn.DeSilva Entertainment

BISHOP SAMUEL KELSEY

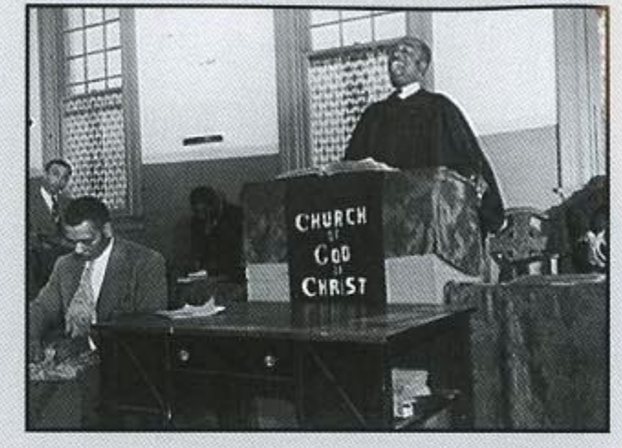
And The Congregation of The Temple Church of God In Christ, Washington, D.C.

Liner Notes to Bishop Samuel L. Kelsey
By Opal Louis Nations

My first encounter with Bishop Kelsey came about during the early spring of 1965 when his entourage—including four congregational singers, his minister, the imposing Rev. John Little, and his gracious and always delightful soloist, Sister Lena Phillips Jones (who had served with the Bishop since the late 1940s)—made their first concert tour of the U.K. Promoters Horst Lippman and Fritz Rau were making a bold, ground-breaking step in bringing black church singers to England on a gospel caravan for the first time in history.

Supporting artists included Inez Andrews and the late Liz Dargen and the Andrewettes plus Rev. Willie Mincey and the late Big Henry Johnson and the 5 Blind Boys of Mississippi. Yours truly was able to secure a seat on the tour bus which took our gospel caravan to theatre venues in Manchester, Sheffield, Liverpool, Birmingham, Leicester and London. As unofficial artist valet, I was fortunate enough to acquaint myself with everyone on the tour, including the excellent supporting keyboardist James Conley, who later went on to head up his own outfit on Savoy Records.

Bishop Kelsey struck me as a humble man off stage. On stage in performance, his whole appearance usually lit up in an expression of joy like Macy's at Christmas. A small man by stature, the Bishop seemed to be able to enlarge his presence



with spirit and passion that filled the concert hall beyond measure with fervor and excitement as he bellowed and hollered. Unfortunately for Lippman and Rau, who were better skilled at bringing successful blues acts to England, the venues were sparsely attended, and the pair lost their shirts on the bookings. In 1965, blues fans, who were accustomed to hearing black blues and folk soloists sing spiritual music, were not quite ready for the real thing.

Despite the lack of attendance, known celebrities like Eric Burden and Dusty Springfield were changed spiritually by the joyous music. Of course things have changed completely since then. Black gospel has become a well-established phenomenon in urban areas of the U.K., especially in London. Fortunately, Lippman and Rau were able to recoup some of their losses from other engagements in Western Europe, notably earlier in Bremen, West Germany where the caravan recorded their legendary, incendiary set for Fontana Records with La Morte Flowe sharing organ accompaniment with Rev. Little. Despite the ensemble's lack of the usual trombone accompaniment, the Bremen concert will always be remembered as the key event that opened the doors for gospel singers and enabling them to spread their art over the European continent.

Today, Bishop Kelsey is remembered as a pivotal figure in the expansion of the Pentecostal Church of God in Christ in Delaware and Washington, D.C. In D.C. alone, Bishop Kelsey was responsible for establishing a dozen C.O.G.I.C. churches, having fought against adversarial forces that resisted the spread of the holiness movement in the nation's capitol. In 1972, having finally gained the respect of city leaders, Kelsey was honored by having a D.C. housing complex named after him—The Samuel Kelsey Garden Apartments.

But all this is far removed from Kelsey's poor and humble beginnings. He was born (according to official documents) on April 27, 1897 in Sandersville, Ga. (Other sources mistakenly give his year of birth as 1898 or 1906.) His parents, Samuel and Ella Kelsey, were farming folk. He was the sixth of thirteen siblings. Back then, Sandersville in Washington County was a small, rural community with no significant place of worship. Sunday service for the Kelseys was held at Robert Hooks' house. Hooks was one of the few black farmers to own his own house.

Young Samuel became inspired by the religious teachings of William Howard, a holiness preacher from Macon, Ga. In his teens, he attended The Pentecostal First-born Church. On May 6, 1915, young Samuel was saved and sanctified, i.e. baptized in the Holy Ghost to the speaking in tongues. This was a Pentecostal rite of passage. The various Pentecostal denominations were formed out of a break with the Azusa Street Revival organization, which had its roots in the white Methodist church. The Revivalists were a holiness movement promoting the speaking in tongues to attain "spiritual perfection." The movement progressed via the teachings of William Joseph Seymour and Jennie Evans. Through them, the Apostolic Faith Gospel Mission was born at 312 Azusa Street. After denominational maneuvering, ex-Baptist Azusa convert Charles Harrison Mason established The Church of God in Christ in Memphis. Mason was first elected overseer and later Bishop of the Memphis branch of the C.O.G.I.C.

Soon after receiving sanctification, Kelsey found a job preaching in the U.S. Army while stationed at Camp Hancock in Augusta. He left the service with an honorable discharge. In May 1915, he became a minister and five years later moved by train to Philadelphia where he married the fourteen-year-old Jeanette Cooper. Jeanette would give birth to four Kelsey children. While in Philadelphia, Kelsey met Elder Henry McCrary from Detroit. McCrary had been a member of The

Firstborn Church in Georgia. After moving to Detroit McCrary became affiliated with the C.O.G.I.C. Through McCrary's influence, most of The Firstborn Churches had switched over to Mason's growing C.O.G.I.C. denomination.

Kelsey joined the Holy Temple C.O.G.I.C. under the leadership of Elder O.K. Thompson. Kelsey's hard work and religious zeal did not go unnoticed. Thompson, seeing a need to spread the word in the nation's capitol, took Kelsey to Washington, D.C. on July 4, 1923. Calling his church The Kelsey Temple Church of God in Christ, Kelsey set up ministry at 331 C Street S.W. where in September 1923 he conducted revivals nightly. The text of his first sermon, "Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord," was later adopted as the church's credo.

Kelsey saved souls at other locations, namely at 404 4 1/2 Street S.W., 2030 Georgia Avenue N.W., 451 Virginia Avenue S.W. and a winter storefront location at 610 H Street S.W. Towards the close of 1923 The Kelsey Temple Church of God in Christ moved permanently to 1435 Park Road N.W., Washington, D.C. 20010. In 1925 Bishop Charles Harrison Mason came up from Memphis to help Kelsey deal with the growth of his church, which by now had grown by leaps and bounds.

Finally, in 1927, Kelsey was granted permission to hold tent services in order to bring his firebrand type of religion to all the people everywhere. For seventeen years he held under-canvas

revivals every summer. Some sources state that Kelsey first began his radio ministry in 1936 and that a building was purchased at 463 K Street from which his broadcast services went out over the air.

By 1940 Kelsey had been promoted to overseer of both his Washington church and a branch in Delaware. His official title became Elder of the church. A year later he began weekly remote radio broadcasts over WWDC AM in an effort to reach the sick and the shut-in. It was not long before Ethel L. Young brought Kelsey to the larger WOOK station. Young was D.C.'s leading gospel radio deejay and promoter at the time. Shortly before this Kelsey had met up with Irwin and Izzie Feld who saw the potential in making Pentecostal Church recordings available to the gospel record buying public. It was the Felds' intention to record Rev. Elder Lightfoot Solomon Michaux and Rev. Samuel Kelsey, along with his two leading soloists, Lena Phillips Jones and Mary Jones in December 1947.

Recordings were made for their Scoop / Super Disc Record Company on Twelfth Street N.E. Super Disc was the parent company with a New York Office. The company's initial release pitched the traditional barn-stompin' "I'm a soldier" with "Babylon" ("Rivers of Babylon"). Kelsey led "I'm a soldier" in howling, lining hymn-like fashion. "Babylon" was patterned more on a traditional congregational hymn. The only indication that "Babylon" ("Rivers of Babylon") is connected aurally with the brass band Holiness tradition is the use of Clint Chandler's sparse trombone accompaniment.

Unlike Rev. Michaux or Elder Charles Beck of Buffalo, New York who both used a variety of brass instruments in their services, Kelsey did not. A second Scoop release was issued at about the time the Felds tried releasing Kelsey Temple product on their parent label. The first Super Disc issue matched Mary Jones' rendering of the traditional "I'll let nothing separate me from His Love" with Lena Phillip Jones' wonderful "Lord, send the rain," one of Lena's most requested songs. This was Lena's second outing—"Lord, I've tried" was the first.

Lena's rich vibrato pipes are remarkably akin to Ernestine Washington's who certainly enjoyed wider recognition in her time. The Second Super Disc release featured their best remembered and certainly largest selling song, "Little boy" (How old are you), lead by the fiery Kelsey who opens with a sermonette and closes with the church burning up the boards. "Little Boy" was covered by both Shirley Caesar and fellow Washington, D.C. native and friend, Mdm Edna Gallmon Cooke.

Kelsey's "Little Boy" set the tone not only for Kelsey's subsequent releases but for other recorded artists of the Pentecostal persuasion. "Little boy" did so well the Felds were able to sell at least one Kelsey Super Disc session to Arnold Maxin at M.G.M. who was just getting started in the business in New York. M.G.M. reissued "Little boy", and this led to its widening popularity. In 1948 only the Trumpeteers' "Milky White Way" outsold Kelsey's "Little Boy." M.G.M. sold a remarkable number of copies, yet Kelsey says he was never paid a cent in royalties either by Maxin or the Felds.

In 1950 Kelsey was elevated to Bishop of Washington, D.C. by Mason and became a member of the Board of Bishops for the C.O.G.I.C. On Tuesday, July 3, 1951 Kelsey was recorded by Decca during Sister Rosetta's 22,000 guest wedding celebration at Washington's Griffith Park. The lucky groom was Russell Morrison, her road manager. This came only a short while after the worst period in Kelsey's life. His dearly beloved wife Jeanette passed in 1949. On December 20, 1950 he married Annie Ruth. Kelsey was still deeply attached to Jeanette and consequently starting a new life with a new wife was much too premature for him. The Kelsey/Annie Ruth marriage endured for only a few months.

With grief and sadness on his mind, Kelsey was still able to preach a startling marriage sermon punctuated with ad-libs and humorous asides like the one that ran "I know how to marry people. I know how to put 'em together. If they don't stay together, it's not my fault." The celebration was financed by a local chain of record stores, retailers who would come to gain in sales of Tharpe's product after the ceremony. The proceedings were glamorized with a firework display said to have cost five thousand dollars. Seats cost from 90 cents to two dollars and fifty cents. The wedding program included musical renditions by Sister Rosetta Tharpe and her Rosettes, Vivian Cooper, the Harmonizing Four plus a local quartet, the Sunset Harmonizers.

Bishop Wells gave the Prologue and Benediction, and local officials made speeches. The proceedings were recorded and marketed in two formats, either on four separate 78s or a 4 x 78 RPM album set with multiple photos pasted on the boards. The set was entitled "Wedding Ceremony" (Decca DL 5382). An album with all of the above, retitled "Spirituals & Gospel Singing" was issued in Germany some time later (on Brunswick LP 87 518.)

The musical performance also included a sadly unrecorded duet arrangement. This was Sister Rosetta Tharpe supported by her old singing partner Marie Knight. A giant twenty-foot set-piece of Sister Tharpe playing her guitar adorned the stage. Sister Rosetta Tharpe was queen for a day.

Kelsey's one and only Decca studio session took place via remote from his church in D.C. on October 14, 1951. This resulted in only three releases. All demonstrated the fact that Kelsey was at the top of his game. Songs such as "I'm a royal child," "I'm a witness for the Lord" plus a third version of his glorious swan song, "Little boy" (How old are you) are some of Kelsey's most impressive firebrandished moments.

Working for the Pentecostal hierarchy plus attending to his many local civic duties kept Kelsey away from recording. Besides, he spent many years working as a D.C. parole officer, helping with many personal welfare and family crisis services. He preached to men on Death Row and often accompanied convicted men on the "walkdown" to the gas chamber. He also preached at the funeral and helped ease the pain for the families. Kelsey also pastored at the Lorton Correctional Institutions.

In June 1965 Kelsey recorded an excellent album for Polydor featuring his minister, Rev. John Little, and three of his choral soloists. At this point Kelsey looked a convincingly youthful and energetic sixty-eight years of age. He now spent more time establishing his outreach ministry, which provided clothing and food for the needy and summer youth programs for the kids.

In 1966 one of Kelsey's radio broadcast transcriptions unofficially showed up among collectors. It gave a clear picture of how his radio program was structured. First Bishop M.E. Holmes gave an introduction. This was followed by a song from the choir and a sermon given by an Elder. Sister Lena Phillips Jones and Sister Hampton sang a number each. A second sermon, usually given by Kelsey himself, followed and the servic ended out with more singing, a final lecture an closure from the choir.

By the early 1970s Kelsey had eased into retire ment. Bishop George W. Crudup assumed th mantle of Bishop of Washington, D.C. Kelsey ha built a Pentecostal fiefdom in four district embracing twenty-three churches. His ministr alone was one thousand members strong.

Kelsey died at his home in Washington, D.C. o January 8, 1993 at the ripe old age of 95. Th Kelsey Temple thrives today under the pastorshi of Elder Fred D. Morris, Sr.

—Opal Louis Nations
November 2005

With thanks to Eric Le Blanc. Text based mainly on a interview with Bishop Kelsey conducted by Dr. Sher Dupree in October 1984.

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