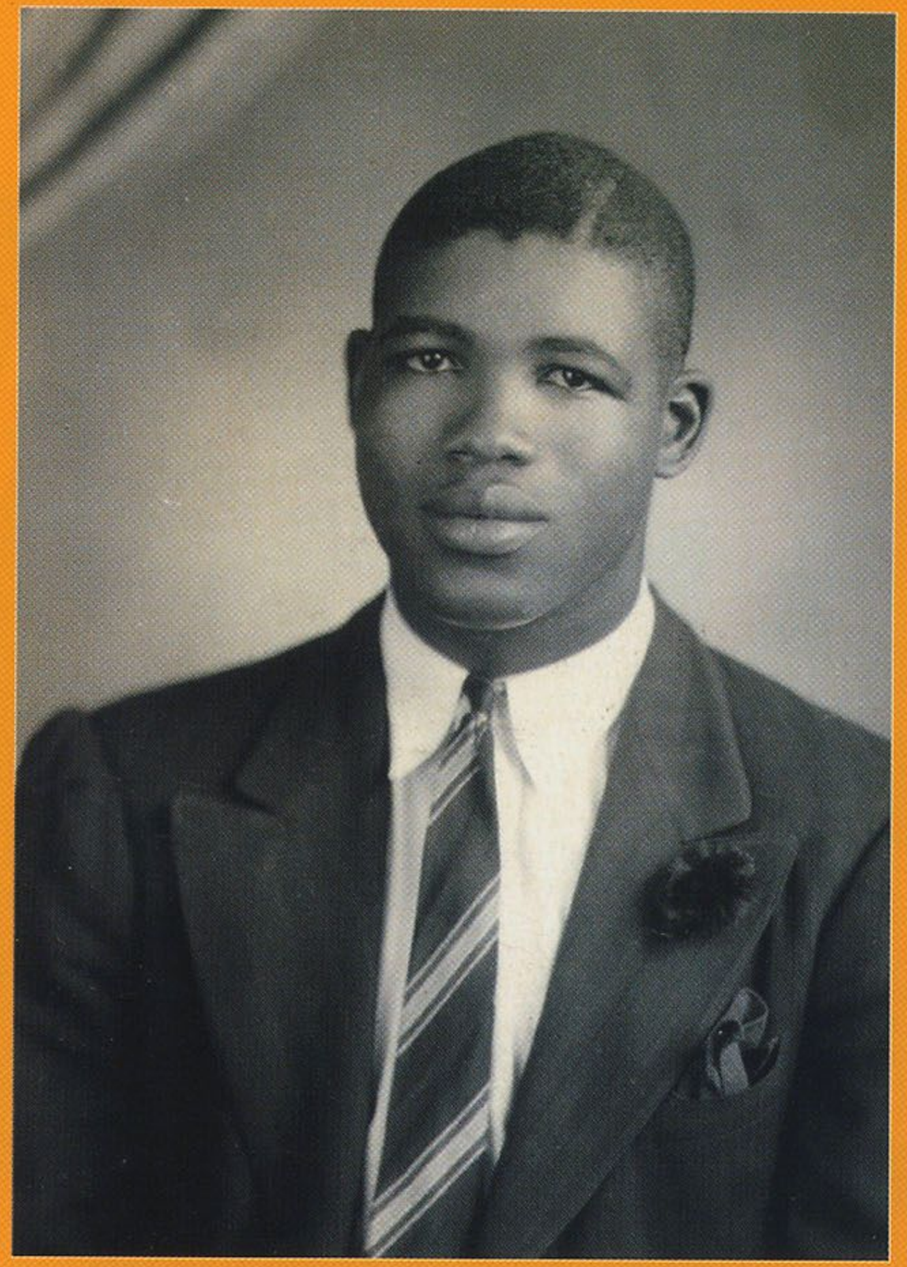
BROTHER CECIL SHAW

"I WANT TO KNOW"



Brother Shaw was perhaps one of the most dynamic and certainly one of the most influential figures in the development of black "shout quartet" in the U.S. during the golden era of the 1950s. Yet, apart from his son's appearance on Soul Train in 1974 plus a glowing mention of his father by Ray Charles in his "Man & Music" biography (Michael Lydon, Riverhead Books, 1999), the man's many deeds remain unsung. Most of Brother Shaw's work on wax (78s he recorded for Lew Chudd during 1952 and 1953) were culled and reissued on an extremely hard-to-find album called "I Stretch My hands to Thee" - Imperial LP 9143 (1962.) If you could find a copy of the album, you would probably have to pay a princely sum to buy it.

Brother Shaw's legendary singing had been long forgotten by the time of the album's release. "I Stretch My Hands to Thee" contains some of the most impressive sanctified gospel quartet ever recorded in Ft. Worth and Houston. Why does Bro. Shaw linger in the shadows of semi-obscurity? One reason is his few recordings, twenty-nine in all (with only eighteen songs actually released), cover only a short period. Secondly, Bro. Shaw's life included many other strong and conflicting interests. A third reason was the problem of trying to keep a quartet together. He despaired over ego-conflicts with male singers and ended up with a female outfit he called The Union Spiritual Harmonizers. Bro. Shaw took gospel singing seriously and would rehearse his singers long hours just to perfect the sound he wanted.

Bro. Shaw was an imposing person, 6' 3" and 225 pounds. He was often mistaken for Joe Louis. His friends believed he was possessed with some kind of aura, or prescience they described as a knowing he was about to enter a room before he stepped into it. When he spoke, his

personal magnetism drew everyone's attention. He was born a second child to Leon and Bessie Shaw on May 19, 1919 in Brenham, Old Washington County, Texas. Brenham sits almost equidistant between Houston to the East and Austin to the West. Leon and Bessie were share-croppers and would relocate to wherever work was available.

Not long after Cecil's birth the family moved north-west to Central Texas to farm in a small town called Littleriver or Three Forks in Bell County. The clan finally settled a few miles north in Belton after a brief stay in White Hall. In Belton Cecil attended Harris High School. He soon took a serious interest in academic subjects, especially mathematics. At play, he became an extremely competitive football player. Large in physical size for his age even then, he built a reputation for being a fearless running back who could move through the opposing side with two or three players on his back. Cecil would keep his fellow team members in good cheer with his excellent wit. He developed a passion for automobiles. Because he often managed to look sharp and quite the charmer, he never had to go out of his way to attract female company.

Cecil and his older brother Lewis D. Shaw (born April 12, 1904) shared common interests and became inseparable friends. (Lewis eventually became a man of the cloth.) Cecil introduced Lewis to his future wife through her other siblings. Cecil and Lewis attended Mt. Zion Baptist Church, along with their sister, Willie Mae. As children the threesome formed the Shaw Singers. Cecil sang tenor, Lewis took bass and Willie Mae alto. The Shaw Singers traveled all over Texas. The trio's most requested song was "Do you want to be a lover of the Lord?" -- one of Cecil's first gospel compositions.

Cecil moved to a tiny place near Temple, just north of Belton, and formed a group called the Junior Soul Stirrers. Lewis Shaw's son, Steven, insists that this was not Senior Roy Crain's group who had come together some eighty miles east of Temple in the Trinity area. We might suppose that Cecil had heard the Soul Stirrers' broadcast over a Houston radio station before their move to Chicago and had decided to adopt their name after their departure. Shortly after the U.S. was drawn into the Second World War, Cecil and Lewis joined the Army Air Corps and were assigned to an Air Base Security Battalion in San Antonio, Texas before shipping out to Southern California. When he left the Service, Cecil moved to Houston where he met and married his wife of long standing, Annie Lou Williams.

Cecil continued to write songs and sing gospel with many well-known gospel quartets, in a voice that was powerful, persuasive and strong. According to Annie Lou Williams, Cecil's widow, Cecil formed The Union Spiritual Harmonizers in the early 1950s from women attending his church in Houston. Most of them are now deceased. She goes on to say that in 1952, while on a scouting trip to Houston, Lew Chudd of Imperial Records had caught Cecil Shaw and The Union Spiritual Harmonizers in concert. He liked what he heard and was much impressed. She adds that after signing a contract, Cecil made eight sessions dates, all conducted in Houston (where he was extremely well known in gospel circles) or Fort Worth. She adamantly asserts that Bro. Shaw never recorded in New Orleans, a statement which contradicts information supplied by Cedric J. Hayes and Robert Laughton in their Gospel Records, 1943-1969 discographies.

In addition, she also says that The Union Spiritual Harmonizers was the

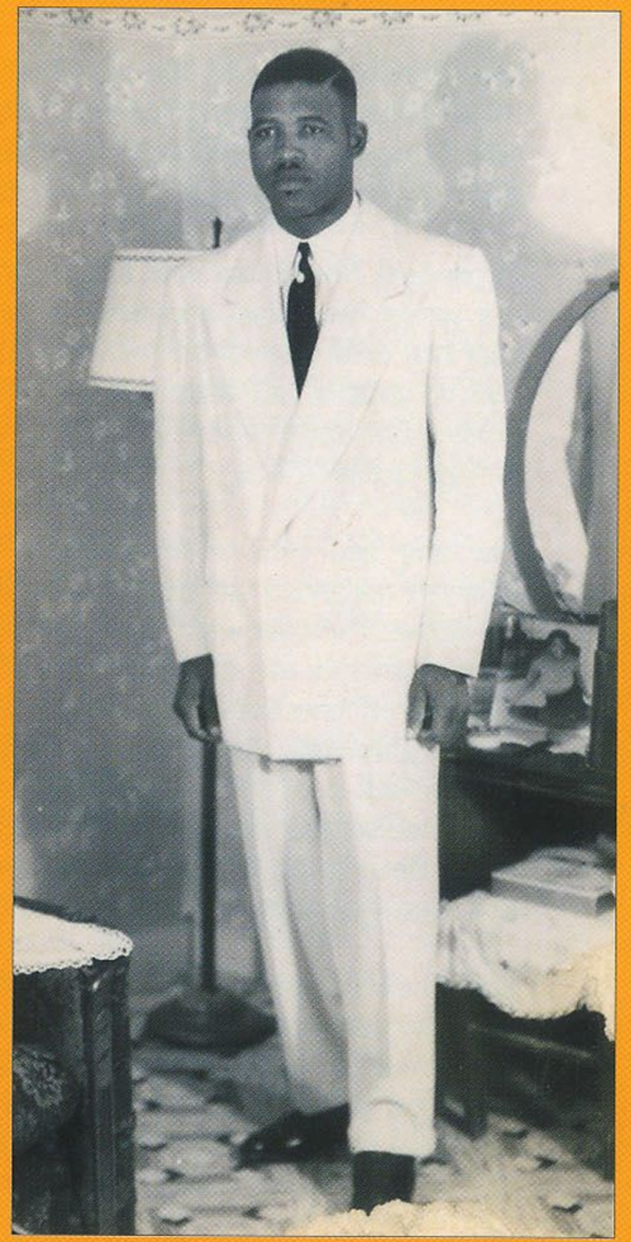
only group he painstakingly put together and would appear regularly with in public performance. But Steven Shaw insists that Cecil told him the Alpha Omega Singers came together through him. The only piece of information we have which might support the Texas sessions locations is that drummer Elmore Nixon appears on at least three of the sessions. It is generally acknowledged that Nixon was based in Houston at this time (1952-53). Annie Lou tells that Cecil, never at any time hired a manager or management agency to handle the group's affairs. Cecil did it all: the songwriting, arranging, voice coaching, booking, road managing and bookkeeping. He also cooked for the group (he was an excellent soul-food chef) and cut and made all his own uniforms.

Brother Shaw's first session was conducted in Houston in February 1952. Two songs were released in March, "Jesus be my keeper," a supplicant's prayer song in the Archie Brownlee style, and the fervent "Pray on my child" which The Staple Singers covered on Vee Jay in 1959 and garnered most of the glory. Although the single had to compete with runaway best sellers like "Let's talk about Jesus" by The Bells of Joy and the exciting "The Lord's gospel train" by Mary DeLoatch, it should have generated more interest. Steven adds that "Jesus be my keeper" was taken as a model for his own song, "Our Father," recorded for Peacock (1550) in 1950 which indicates that Cecil must have sung this song long before it was recorded.

Lew Chudd probably concentrated on investing most of his publicity dollars in Fats Domino's "Goin' home" which shot to the top of the charts during this period in time. However, Chudd must have thought Bro. Shaw promising as he hauled him back into the studio two months later to record not only with The Union Spiritual Harmonizers but with The Silverlight Quartet of Houston, a group with whom Bro. Shaw sang lead on occasion.

This resulted in the double release. The Silverlight waxing included a tightly knit and chanted "Jesus, lend me a helping hand" and a righteous reading of "Unfair deeds" set to the refrain of the spiritual "Come over here." A tough alternating shout-lead was used on "Unfair deeds." The Union Spiritual Harmonizers-supported songs were "Jesus gave me life," the first with drum accompaniment, and the upbeat "See my Jesus by and by," an original Bro. Shaw composition. Why neither of these gems did not hit the top sellers list remains a mystery.

Bro. Shaw had clearly become a singer's singer. He was admired not only by The Staple Singers but by Little Joe Ligon before he joined The Mighty Clouds of Joy. by Robert Blair of The Violinaires and Ted Taylor who was inspired to embark on a musical career after hearing



Bro. Shaw in concert. Among Bro. Shaw's most notable compositions are "Will Jesus be waiting for me," recorded by Archie Brownlee and The Five Blind Boys of Mississippi on Peacock in 1952, and "I was praying," again by Brownlee and The Blind Boys in 1952.

In concert Bro. Shaw was Archie Brownlee's strongest threat. This bore out when Brownlee and Bro. Shaw shared the same bill. As Brownlee was the best known singer, Bro. Shaw was slated to go on first. There was no second act that night. Bro. Shaw had taken the crowd into paradise. Brownlee swore he would never follow Bro. Cecil Shaw, and this is high praise indeed.

On June 2nd 1952 in Fort Worth, Texas, Bro. Shaw and The Silverlight Quartet recorded the eerily beautiful "Heavenly bells have called mother home," sliced with the hypnotic "I got Jesus in my heart" which demonstrated the effectiveness of the swing-lead. The release makes full use of the prevailing sanctified shout style. Bro. Shaw and The Sliverlights ably demonstrate that as far as spiritual intensification is concerned, there are few equals. Bro. Shaw's recordings spread his art over the South. Consequently, he was able to broaden his touring territory. Despite all this grueling travel, long hard hours and tough singing, Bro. Shaw always seemed to retain a youthful appearance.

Bro. Shaw recorded three more times in 1952, once with The Silverlights and twice with his own tailor-made outfit, The Union Spiritual Harmonizers, before the group split up. The Silverlight Quartet release featured the sing-sermon, "A Christian's plea," sounding every bit as skillfully conveyed as any Archie Brownlee vehicle, and the dirge-like "Livin' my life for Jesus."

The two Union Spiritual Harmonizer releases brought us the hymn-like "Jesus my friend," the funereal "Walk with me" with its sanctified male and female alternating lead arrangements, the roof-raising, lung-splitting "Have mercy my father" and the liltingly sweet "Yes God knows," soldered firmly by the fiery pipes of Bro. Shaw's raw and powerful soloing.

One of Bro. Shaw's cousins, Andrew Johnson, sang in Houston's Alpha-Omega Singers alongside Christopher Moore, G. Bland, Ernest Booker and others (tenor Ernest Booker went on to even greater glory singing with the Lou Rawls lineup of the Pilgrim Travelers in the late 1950s.) As his own group had split up, Bro. Shaw was invited as lead singer into The Alpha-Omegas. With this quartet, Bro. Shaw was able to continue recording for Imperial Records. Their first coupling was issued in July 1953 just when Fats Domino was soaring up the charts with "Please don't leave me." Songs chosen were the thundering double tempo arrangement of "I know he'll answer" and the hauntingly beautiful "In heaven I'll rest." After hearing all of this fine shout-gospel one is automatically inclined to think that even Archie Brownlee must have adopted some of Bro. Shaw's whoops and hollers to dramatize his own tortuous style.

Bro. Shaw's second and final session with The Alpha-Omega Singers on Imperial yielded "Are you concerned" and "Heavenly train," but, because of poor sales, Lew Chudd chose not to release any more of Bro. Shaw's work. Continuing to record with The Alpha-Omega Singers, Bro. Shaw waxed the rhythmic "I want to know," paired with the breakneck "Move up." He had created his own short-lived Shaw Record Company to showcase them. Both were in a-cappella and give

us some finely crafted shout gospel. Cecil also trained his three daughters to sing (Susan, Sheryl and Alesa). Legend has it that all three had the prettiest voices around Houston.

The Bro. Shaw – Ray Charles connection mentioned earlier as published in Michael Lydon's Ray Charles biography, "Man and music," runs as follows. During the spring of 1951 Della Beatrice "Bea" Howard, a Houston native and one-time singer in The Union Spiritual Harmonizers, caught Ray Charles being introduced on Clifton "King Bee" Smith's "King Bee" radio show on Houston's WCOH. Ray expressed a love for gospel music and knowing Bro. Shaw came from Houston named his group one of his all-time favorites. Something in Ray's voice overcame "Bea's" reserve and she called the station. Would Ray like to meet Bro. Shaw? She inquired. Yes, came Rays reply, but he would like also to meet the caller. The couple met two days later. Ray was taken by "Bea's" quiet reserve and down to earth ways. They made dates and "Bea" became pregnant with Ray's child. They married the following spring and settled in Dallas for awhile. The couple stayed spliced for twenty-one years.

In 1955, Bro. Shaw quit gospel music as a primary interest and set up an automobile dealership he labeled "Shaw Motors." Without Bro. Shaw, The Alpha-Omega Singers went on to record for Peacock in Houston. Concentrating more on family life, Bro. Shaw and his wife Annie Lou raised four girls and one boy, Cecil Junior who, taking up soul singing, joined Billy Davis Jnr and Marilyn McCoo to form a vocal trio after the couple's break-up with The Fifth Dimension. In March 1974 Cecil Jr. appeared on T.V.'s Soul Train alongside Jerry Butler and The Delfonics. He sang "Practice what you preach," a song he had recorded for Billy and Marilyn's Bill-Mar Records in St. Louis.

Bro. Shaw's brother Lewis's son Steven formed a gospel group called The Gospel Holy Tones. The Gospel Holy Tones try to keep Bro. Shaw's music alive by presenting some of his songs in a traditional way. In October 1991, Brother Cecil Leon Shaw, "The Gospel Joe Louis," died of a heart attack. In 1992 Steve re-released two of Bro. Shaw's waxings "Pray on my child" and "See my Jesus by and by" on cassette with additional drum-track overdubbing. The cassette is still available from Shaw Records, through Steven's gospel group at www.gospelholytones.com. It is a sin that most of Bro. Cecil Leon Shaw's outstanding recorded work has remained out of print since the mid 1960s. The quality of his gospel singing is such that it equals anything Archie Brownlee or Clarence Fountain ever laid to wax. You are advised to surf the Net and seek it out.

Opal Louis Nations

With invaluable assistance from Annie Lou Williams, Bro. Steven Shaw and Billy Vera.

This text was previously published in the April 2005 edition of "Blues & Rhythm – The Gospel Truth". The magazine is available from 2 South Edge, Shipley, Bradford, England BD18 4RA or via their website, www.bluesandrhythm.co.uk

With The Alpha Omega Singers

1. I KNOW HE'LL ANSWER (IMPERIAL 5242)
2. IN HEAVEN I'LL REST (IMPERIAL 5242)
3. I WANT TO KNOW (SHAW UNISSUED)
4. MOVE UP (SHAW UNISSUED)

With The Silverlight Singers

5. JESUS, LEND ME A HELPING HAND (IMPERIAL 5184)
6. UNFAIR DEEDS (IMPERIAL 5184)
7. HEAVENS BELLS HAVE CALLED MOTHER HOME (IMPERIAL 5253)
8. I GOT JESUS IN MY HEART(IMPERIAL 5253)
9. A CHRISTIAN'S PLEA (IMPERIAL 5298)
10. LIVIN' MY LIFE FOR JESUS (IMPERIAL 5298)

With the Union Spiritual Singers

11. JESUS BE MY KEEPER (IMPERIAL 5179)
12. PRAY ON MY CHILD (IMPERIAL 5179)
13. JESUS GAVE ME LIFE (IMPERIAL 5185)
14. SEE MY JESUS BY AND BY (IMPERIAL 5185)
15. JESUS MY FRIEND (IMPERIAL 5206
16. WALK WITH ME LORD (IMPERIAL 5206)
17. HAVE MERCY MY FATHER (IMPERIAL 5217)
18. YES GOD KNOWS (IMPERIAL 5217)

ALL COMPOSITIONS SHAW (COPYRIGHT CONTROL)