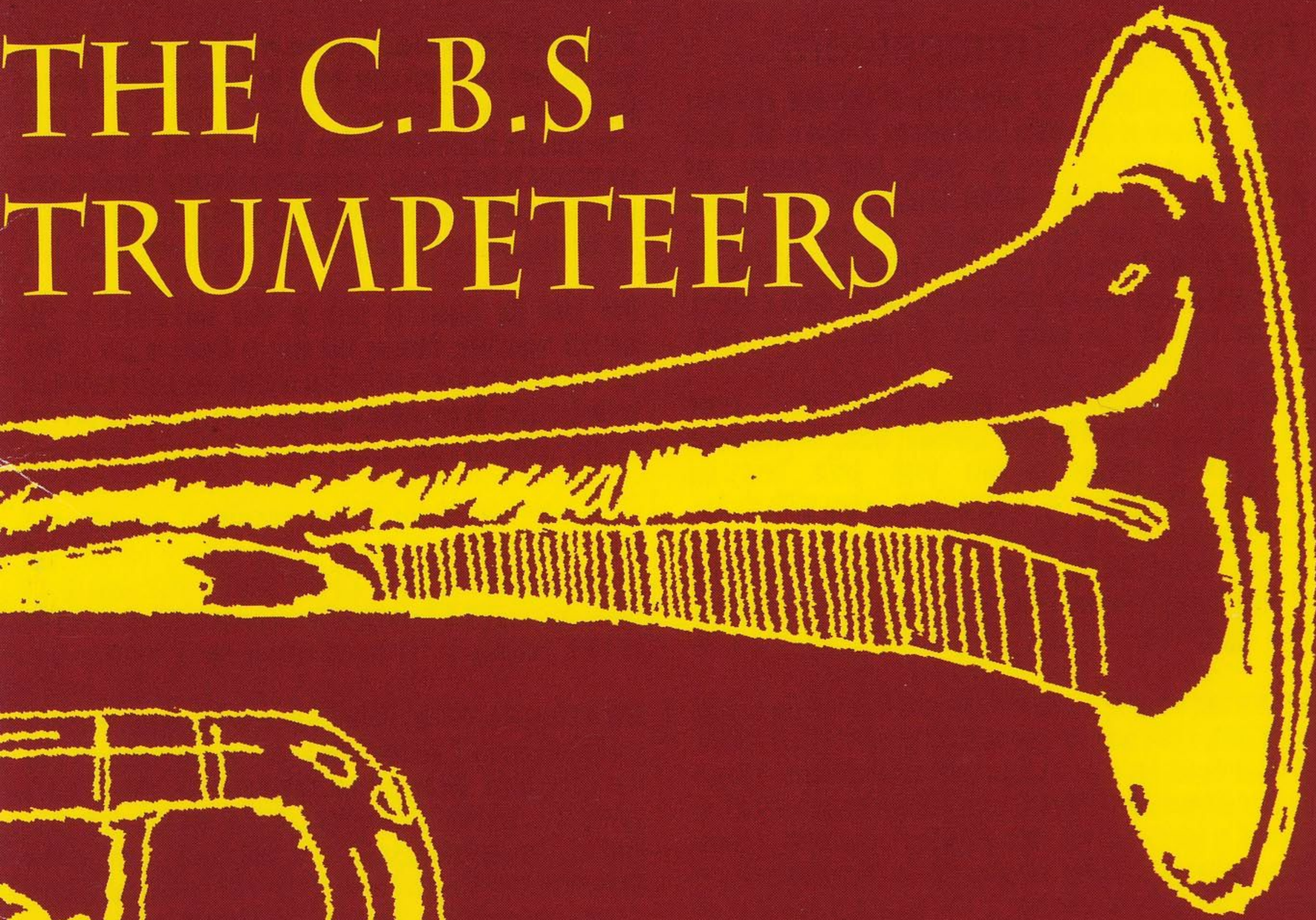
THE C.B.S. TRUMPETEERS



milky white way

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The C.B.S. Trumpeteers are as active today as they were back when the group first evolved out of The Willing Four of Baltimore, Maryland in 1946. Today's Trumpeteers quartet consists of James Kelly, manager and guiding light, Johnny Branch, William Chestnut and Frank Andrews. "The Trumpeteers have just returned from engagements in Florida and South Carolina," states Kelly's wife. Lornie Parker, proprietor of Parker's Barbershop in downtown Baltimore, handles the group's constant stream of bookings, and the boys are just making ready to release a new album.

Lead singer Joseph E. Johnson, who had served both in The Willing Four and in The Golden Gate Quartet, founded The Trumpeteers in 1946 when he rounded up bass singer James Keels and tenor Raleigh Turnage from The Willing Four and baritone Willie MacNair. The Trumpteteers stuck to the jubilee style perfected by groups like The Golden Gate Quartet. The boys worked for WCAO in Baltimore, cutting transcriptions for a shoe company. It was during this time they recorded their first commercial radio transcriptions, "Oh Lord, What A Time" (Parts 1 and 2).

They were soon noticed by CBS who signed the group in place of The Jubilaires of New York to a daily radio show aired over most of the corporation's affiliates. When Leo Mesner, one of the two brothers who owned and operated Aladdin Records of Hollywood visited Baltimore, he caught The Trumpeteers' radio show and was impressed by their signature tune, "Milky White Way," a chart written by Landers Coleman of The Coleman Brothers. Five songs, including "Milky White Way," were recorded at WCAO for Aladdin on September 12, 1947. The release of "Milky White Way" to kick off Mesner's brand new Score subsidiary in May 1948 caused a major sensation. "Milky White Way" was reported in the trade papers as having sold over a million copies. In reality, "Milky White Way" became the first of a handful of gospel records that were purchased in great numbers across the country during the first Post-War decade.

"On the road," states Ray Funk, "the group's modified jubilee singing had to compete with an emerging hard quartet style pioneered by the likes of Archie Brownlee and The Reverend Julius Cheeks." In an effort to make The Trumpeteers a more viable investment, the Mesner brothers had the group record a secular session billed as The Rockets, and the release of "Loch Lomond" came about. "Loch Lomond" (Aladdin 3017) released in 1948 sounded every bit like a record by The Trumpeteers, except for the lyrics. The record failed to gain notice. Most of The Trumpeteers Quartet's seventeen Score singles releases issued over a period of five years sold in appreciable numbers. By December 1949, The Trumpeteers, now managed by Harry Leneiska, ex-executive of Universal Attractions, were recording for Syd Nathan's King Records out of studios rented in New York City. But the group was back at Aladdin for two more sessions in late 1950.

Then came the release of sides on Okeh and Gotham in 1952 and 1953 respectively. Bouncing back again to Aladdin in June of 1953, The Trumpeteers chalked up another four releases. These were tough times for The Trumpeteers. By now, quartet singing had changed radically away from close four-part harmonies into swing leads and wailing backgrounds.

In late 1954, Herb Slotkin of West Philadelphia's tiny independent Grand label purchased a bunch of Syd Nathan's unissued 1950 Trumpeteers masters. It is at this point that the group began to bill themselves as The C.B.S. Trumpeteers. Two singles were released in 1955 and an album including the two records came to light a few years later.

After two years of fallow times for The C.B.S. Trumpeteers on wax, they signed with Nashboro Records. It was Ernie Young's original intention to record the group in an updated jubilee style accompanied only with guitar and drums. The group's make-up at this point consisted of Joseph E. Johnson, lead tenor and baritone, Raleigh Turnage, tenor, Carey Bradley, tenor, Calvin Stewart, second lead and baritone, plus Roland Allen, bass. Bradley came from The Kings Of Harmony quartet out of Birmingham, Alabama. Stewart sang in The Baronets out of Spartenburg, South Carolina, alongside the legendary Reverend Julius Cheeks, and Allen came from The Golden Trumpets. Sadly, all are now gone from this world.

The C.B.S. Trumpeteers' first Nashboro release, "I Want To Know," matched with "Seven Angels," came out in August 1957. "Seven Angels" with its break-neck rhythm and choppy vocal styling made quite a noise in gospel circles and was included on "Best Loved Gospel Songs" (Nashboro LP 7006), a choice various artists collection of the early 1960s. By 1958, both Turnage and Bradley had gone, and Robert Johnson was added into the mix. The second C.B.S. Trumpeteers session took place on March 11, 1959. A second remake (the first done by Grand) of "Milky White Way" caught the record-buying public's notice in

June 1959 and renewed action looked like making the song a hit for the second time.

John R. Richbourg, dee-jay for the Excello Show broadcast over WLAC, dropped "Touch Me, Lord Jesus," by The Angelic Gospel Singers in favor of "Milky White Way," as the program's new signature tune. The Nashboro "Milky White Way" version differed only from the original in respect to bolder guitar figures. The same floating harmonies and Johnson's smooth, infectious delivery prevailed. The Nashboro version survives in two alternate takes. We have chosen Take 3 (Take 2 was the previously unissued version) which has a prominent snare drum and interesting occasional piano accompaniment added for sweetening.

"Right John" is on the flip. "Right John" rocks like crazy, and is presented here in its one tighter alternate version. The original differs only by the fact that the piano is given a stronger role. The same applies to the loping "My Lord Calls Me ("Steal Away") released in November 1959. "My Lord Calls Me," seems to lack grit in the issued version. Ernie Young always preferred lots of treble, which, he thought, "brightened" a song's performance. The alternate of "My Lord Calls Me" has the group pumping like a gospel train.

On the reverse, "Christian's Testimony," the boys really wail as Johnson plunders the lead and broadens his range by so doing. Again, only one alternate version survives (Take 1) and it is this that seems to score the most points. The C.B.S. Trumpeteers fans had to wait almost four years before the group was again called to the studio for their third and final Nashboro session. Six songs were recorded, all of which saw the record racks over a period of two years. "God Is Coming," the plug side of the first release, found the group in stereo. Gone was the sense of quaint simplicity-a heavier, more deliberate rhythm section loomed in its place. Nevertheless, the quartet still knew how to move the church, and Johnson was every bit as capable of dishing out the message without restraint.

"One Day I Was Walking" (or "New Birth" as the tape box seems to imply) is the group's softer side of the single on which Johnson confronts his master in no uncertain terms. "My Heart Bubbles Over," the top side of the group's second release, is a stirring revival service vehicle recorded in two takes. Take 2 seems loose and untogether, so we have chosen the unissued version which seems to be more awake. "Everything Moves" in its previously unissued form finds The C.B.S. Trumpeteers back in their accustomed groove. Johnson implores unprovisionally, the group flies together, and the instruments hold their respectful places.

The group's third and finest release, "Lord, Ease My Weary Mind," sandwiched with "Little Wooden Church," variously ascribed two alternate subtitles on the tape box— "It's Church Time" or "It's Worship Time" make their debut. "Lord, Ease My Weary Mind" is one of the aggregation's most extrovert Nashboro etchings. Johnson gets down and testifies like a sanctified holiness preacher. "Little Wooden Church" is found to have one alternate version (Take 1), and it is this we feel is the stronger of the two.

After Johnson and The C.B.S. Trumpeteers left Nashboro Records, and following a one-shot deal with Jubilee, the quartet continued to record in Nashville. Calvin Stewart assumed management and got the group a deal with Hoyt Sullivan Enterprises (HSE) whereon they waxed fine renditions of "Gospel Train," "When They Ring Them Golden Bells," and a third remake of "Milky White Way" ("Mighty Number" - HSE LP 1499). Since Johnson's death on October 10, 1984, The C.B.S. Trumpeteers under Stewart's leadership recorded the "Judgement's Coming" album for the Black label, followed by "Gospel Train" on Marilyn Records.

With the resurgence of interest in jubilee quartet singing and the popularity of old-time acapella groups like Wesley Hill And The Quintones of New Jersey (Hill sang with Bill Langford And The Southern Sons on RCA in the 1940s), the growing interest for quartet singing in its purest form can only strengthen its long and colorful tradition. We hope that this CD is a party to that.

- Opal Louis Nations November, 1995

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Special Thanks to: **Bob Laughton**