Rev Paul Excano, George Scott (tenors); Clarence Fountain, Olice Thomas (baritones); Johnny Fields (bass) ; with George Scott (guitar) c. April 1948

1. JESUS LOVE DEVINE COLEMAN 5982 (Fountain)
2. SEE EVERYBODY'S MOTHER BUT MINE (Fountain)
3. WHAT MANNER OF MAN IS THIS COLEMAN 5987 (Brown)
4. WHAT MORE CAN JESUS DO (Babb)
5. DON'T WONDER ABOUT HIM COLEMAN 5988 (Fountain)
6. I WANT MY CROWN (Ruth)

As above plus Rev. George W. Warren (vocal) c. 1950/51

7. BY AND BY GOSPEL 120 (Lattimore)
8. I'VE AN INTEREST OVER THERE (Fountain)
9. LIVING ON MOTHER'S PRAYER GOSPEL 121 (Fountain)
10. RIGHT TO THE TREE OF LIFE (Ghent)
11. ANYHOW GOSPEL 125 (Fountain)
12. WHEN THE ROLL IS CALLED UP YONDER (Fountain)
13. DEATH HAS TAKEN MOTHER HOME GOSPEL 129 (Fountain)
14. HONEY IN THE ROCK (Jones)
15. IN THE VINEYARD GOSPEL 132 (Carter)
16. POWER OF THE LORD (Williams)
17. JESUS WON'T DENY ME GOSPEL 133 (Fountain)
18. MOTHER'S SONG (Anderson)
19. ALL THE DAYS OF MY LIFE GOSPEL 136 (Fountain)
20. BLESSED BE THE NAME (Fountain)
21. ALL I HAVE IS GONE GOSPEL 138 (Fountain)
22. GONNA HAVE A GOOD TIME (Fountain)
23. GOOD RELIGION GOSPEL 142 (Fountain)
24. NO MORE TEARS,NO MORE DYING (Fountain)
25. COME OVER HERE GOSPEL 146 (Johnson)
26. SINCE MOTHER'S BEEN GONE (Fountain)
27. CANAAN LAND GOSPEL 147 (Fountain)
28. LEAVE YOUR BURDENS THERE (Fountain)

THE FIVE BLIND BOYS OF ALABAMA

Photo 1

This CD derives from very rare and old 78rpm recordings many of which were originally manufactured in small quantities. There will therefore be a significant amount of surface noise audible. Whilst we have removed much extraneous noise it was considered that any further use of noise reduction programmes would compromise the integrity of the original recordings.

Over the course of the last fifty-eight years, the Five Blind Boys of Alabama have risen from a bunch of kids busking for spare change on army bases around Talladega, Alabama to their induction into The Gospel Music Hall of Fame in Nashville in December 2002. With assured perseverance and a willingness to adapt to prevailing trends in popular music, the Five Blind Boys of Alabama have survived prejudice, hardship and borderline poverty.

The Talladega Institute for the Negro Deaf and Blind off Highway 21 east of Birmingham, Alabama was the spawning ground for the group. Talladega's state boarding school was poorly funded, conditions were harsh and discipline severe, yet grade school students were taught how to read Braille and make brooms, chairs and shelves to raise money during the Depression. Aside from self-reliance and Bible study, vocational trades were taught, and a mixed chorus of some twenty students was kept up. The best students, twelve or so, were picked out for the Glee Club Chorus, the school's showcase group.

By 1938, the Glee Club Chorus included the nine-year-old Alabama-born Clarence Fountain. Clarence was born November 28, 1929 in Tyler, Dallas County, to Will and Ida Fountain. Fountain even then possessed a strong, passionate set of vocal chords that stood out from the rest of the chorus. Other lucky members included tenor Tommy Gilmore, future second lead tenor/guitar George Lewis Scott, born in Notasulga, Macon County, Alabama March 18, 1929, future lead tenor Velma Bozman Traylor (or Trailer), Olice Thomas, baritone, born May

5, 1926 in Gainesville, Sumter County, Alabama, and Lowndesboro native Johnny Lee Fields, born September 9, 1927, future bass singer.

All six were plucked from the chorus to form The Happy Land Jubilee Singers. Some biographical histories mention Birmingham-born Jimmy Carter (February 11, 1932), but I doubt Carter was a member of the seminal outfit, being only six years old at the time. Like other schools reliant on patronage, the Talladega administration saw the advantage of sending the Happy Land Jubilees out to local churches to raise money for the school. As all the group members were blind and of pre-teen age, they were forbidden to concertize beyond a few miles' distance. Of course they snuck out in secret of an evening to sing and earn a few cents for themselves.

On one local church gig the group met an ambitious teen who became the hopefuls' first sighted manager. The new manager drove the group to church programs in local towns. This would have worked out except the driver stole all of the money. Although the boys had a music teacher (all the teachers were white), they were not taught to master any form of popular music outside of camp songs and narrative numbers. But they found a chance to listen to NBC radio and the Golden Gate Quartet's weekly syndicated program. The Happy Lands tuned in to the Gates and picked up the jubilee harmonies themselves as best they could. Hours of repetitious work lead to the boys learning many of the Gates' arrangements in perfect a-cappella.

By 1944, the Happy Land Jubilee Singers were allowed to quit school and go off on their own. With Vess Lawdon as manger and driver, the quartet made their first big trip in a 1938 Buick to Gaston, Trailer's home town twenty miles distant. Next stop was Birmingham where they made a sizeable impression on the church community. This led to radio work on WSGN. The Happy Land repertoire was such that they had included old folk melodies and spirituals that appealed to white Christian churchgoers. This tactic generated a daily fifteen minute spot on Birmingham's WKAX, a white sacred music station. Their program was sponsored by Smith & Gaston Funeral Homes of Birmingham.

Photo 2

In 1945 The Happy Land Jubilee Singers won a "wake-singing" contest for Smith & Gaston. Groups were entered in the state-wide contest at Legion Field before a crowd of 44,000. J.V. Goodman, the sponsor's front man, quit the company to become the group's new manager. The Goodmans looked after the outfit as if they were their own kin. But tragedy followed in 1947 when lead vocalist Velma Bozman Trailer died as a result of a fatal accidental gunshot wound. The loss of Trailer, who had been the fabric that held the group together, was felt deeply by all members of the group. Their sadness was made worse by the departure of Tommy Gilmore who no longer wanted to travel. The group was determined to make an even greater impact on church-going people in places they had never before ventured. But the Goodmans were unable to travel far afield, having other interests that tied them to the Birmingham area. The boys needed a sighted singer who could both manage and book the group.

Through John Payne, baritone with the New Orleans Chosen Five, the quartet was able to find Rev. Paul Excano, former lead tenor with the Five Veterans. After Trailer died Excano served as "man in reserve" with the group. Clarence Fountain took on more lead work and cut baritone backup. Exkano (his birth name) was born in Louisiana September 17, 1912. Being older and having had more singing experience, Excano really smoothed out the roughness and added professional polish to the group once he had settled in. By now they had become the Happyland Gospel Singers, a.k.a. Four Blind Boys (which was unfair to Excano as he had become the fifth member).

By January 1948 the quartet had made Chattanooga, Tennessee their home base from which to strike out to programs in Nashville, Knoxville, Cookeville, Jackson, Memphis and Atlanta. In Chattanooga they performed on the airwaves over WDOD. Enter the Coleman Brothers. We have to go back to 1944 to pick up their story. The Colemans were an enterprising and extremely popular bunch of jubilee singers from Kenbridge, Virginia. In late 1944, with a good part of the extensive singing family moved to Newark, New Jersey, they pooled their resources and formed the Coleman Company. Next step was the purchase of a seventy-two room hotel at 59 Court Street. The Coleman Hotel was designed to serve many purposes. When gospel singing aggregations and friends came to town they would be encouraged to stay at the Coleman. One or two of the major quartets were lucky enough to record for them in their freshly built basement studio hooked up to WHBI Radio, a station where the Coleman Brothers and other broadcast of a Sunday (see the liner notes to ACMCD 4080 for more details.)

When President Roosevelt died from a cerebral haemorrhage in Georgia on April 12, 1945, the Colemans were asked to broadcast a number of sacred songs over an entire three-day national mourning period. The tribute ran day and night over CBS. (The Colemans were a natural choice as CBS had previously made them their "staff vocal group.") The broadcast was heard by millions, including the Happyland Gospel Singers who were much taken by their interpretation of "I can see everybody's mother but mine," a song the Manor/Arco label released three times, the first falling a few weeks before the president's death.

Now back to the Happylands. The Happylands adopted the Coleman Brothers' song for themselves. They had also heard of the Coleman Hotel and the fact that the Five Blind Boys (of Mississippi) had recorded for Coleman in February 1948. Hot on their heels, the Happylands headed for the Coleman Studio where, with little persuasion, they were recorded in June, four months later. "I can see everybody's mother but mine" was the Happylands' first meticulously rehearsed release. Both Fountain and Excano shared lead.

The Happylands enjoyed two further releases on the Coleman imprint from the same recording session, "What manner of a man is this" and "Don't wonder about Him," issued a month later. Unfortunately, they never got a chance to record for Coleman again

It was Melvin Coleman, the session producer, who suggested the Happylands record their song "I can see everybody's mother but mine" as the group's first outing. This turned out to be a smart move as the record sold well. The Happylands travelled extensively. As a result, they would often have to rehearse in the car en route to a program. They also found they had to endure strong competition from label-mates the Five Blind Boys who daily "wrecked" churches singing in the gradually emerging "shout" gospel style.

The group's lead, Archie Brownlee, was more than a match for Clarence Fountain, and Rev. Percell Perkins could equal anything the Rev. Paul Excano had to offer. It was then that the Happylands knew they had to develop their own personal style in order to survive the increasing competition. Rivalry usually took the form of quartet battles. One group would try to win out in crowd acclaim over the other by power of voice and slickness of presentation.

One day New Jersey concert promoter Ronnie (Robin) Williams realized the financial potential of having the two blind quartets compete in concert. A venue was set up at the Laurel Gardens and the handbills were carefully crafted with the wording "Come see the Blind Boys from Alabama and the Blind Boys from Mississippi. They're going to have a battle of music to see who wins." The Blind Boys of Mississippi won the initial battle, but the two groups were

Photo 3

long-time friends and nobody harboured a grudge. As it turned out, the two outfits often battled over the years to come, and all in all, the Alabama line-up won top dog more times than not.

The Coleman label never had Fountain and the group under exclusive contract. They were unhappy with the poor way their records were being distributed. This allowed Rev. Paul Excano the freedom to go elsewhere. Excano took the group to the Miller Brothers' new Gospel label in Philadelphia. The Millers, who also ran Palda Records, had just set up the Gospel imprint when Excano came to them in early 1950. By now the group was going by the name the Five Blind Boys from Alabama. They committed to four sessions over the course of two years.

The group continued to travel extensively, rehearsing in motels and homes whenever they could. Rehearsals were always preceded by prayers. In the South they suffered from "Jim Crow" hospitality, bad "back door" food, being forced to stay with friends for shelter, and general day-to-day harassment. Being blind only made matters worse. In early 1950 Gospel released two singles, "By & by" and a second "mother song" called "Living on mother's prayer." Fountain and Excano would record three other mother-centred songs during their tenure with Gospel Records, "Death has taken mother home," "Mother's song" and "Since mother's been gone."

The Millers had truly believed in the group's potential and issued thirteen singles on the group. For some reason, the outfit changed names once more to the Five Blind Boys in 1951, but by the end of their Gospel contract they had reverted back to the former Five Blind Boys From Alabama. Their onstage routine would always show a row of seated soldiers. Fountain would move around and sometime drift out into the audience, hanging onto Excano's shoulder from behind.

In early 1953, Excano quit the Five Blind Boys From Alabama to pastor a church in Louisiana. His place was taken by Rev. George W. Warren whom the boys had met in 1948 when Warren, then with the National Clouds of Joy, was waxing for the Colemans. Warren left the National Clouds shortly thereafter and joined the Florida Soul Stirrers who recorded for Federal in 1951. He stayed with the Five Blind Boys of Alabama for almost seven years.

During the Gospel label years, the boys enjoyed several sizeable sellers like "Honey in the rock" and "Come over here." Like the earlier Coleman sides, the Gospel releases lacked the kind of promotion and general distribution their similarly disadvantages colleagues from Mississippi enjoyed. Like family quartets such as the Norfleets and Bronner Brothers, blind quartets stayed together. Changes in personnel only occurred once in a while, usually when somebody passed on or took up a ministry.

Greater fame and fortune for the Five Blind Boys of Alabama lay just around the corner. In November 1953 the outfit signed with Specialty Records in Hollywood with whom they recorded their most glorious moments.

--- Opal Louis Nations *March 2006*

Photo credits:
Photo 1: Blind Boys of Alabama - 1954 (courtesy: Ray Funk)
Photo 2: Happy Land Jubilee Singers (Ray Funk)
Photo 3: Happyland Gospel Singers (Ray Funk)
Main Cover Photo: 5 Blind Boys of Alabama (courtesy: Jerry Zoltan)