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By

Original Five Blind Boys

(JACKSON HARMONEERS)

"WORLD PRAYER"

"HOW FAR AM I FROM CANAAN"

PEACOCK # 1553

"COMING HOME"

"MOTHER DON'T WORRY" PEACOCK # 1580

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ORIGINAL FIVE BLIND BOYS

(Jackson Harmoneers)

"Precious Memories"

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The World Famous 5 Blind Boys

JACKSON HARMONEERS RELIGIOUS GROUP

THE FIVE BLIND BOYS OF MISSISSIPPI

It is now widely considered that Archie Brownlee was the "hardest"-singing quartet lead of gospel's Golden Age (1945-1955). As with the 5 Blind Boys from Alabama (see ACMCD 4204), the Mississippi aggregation was composed of five or six blind singers, led by a sighted man, hand to shoulder in a line onto the concert stage. Some time during the early 1950s, "hard" techniques, i.e. whoops, moans, screams, yells, grunts, shrieks and wails, were introduced as devices to heighten excitement when quartet "battles," devised by promoters to elicit extra revenue, got firmly under way.

Rather like gladiators in combat, singers fought to win the most public acclaim. Unlike the cardinal rules of jubilee (motionless, close singing, precise timing and fastness to melody), "shout" singing took on dramatic creeps, knee-drops and thigh slapping. Two leads were utilized in back and forth succession to build tension. Falsetto exaggeration and pulpit preaching were added to disrupt the otherwise perfectly developed melody line.

All this thrilled the sinners and sent the sisters into swoons. But as always, however, there was a conservative element in the black church who thought that the singer, when introduced as part of a worship service, should exhibit decorum and be an inspiration to those seeking God rather than by making a circus to win fans through theatrical devises.

Photo 1

Our story begins not with spiritual exaggeration, however, but with one man's pioneering vision to educate the poor and disadvantaged, those who would not otherwise get the chance to do well in life. At the turn of the Twentieth Century, Prof. Lawrence C. Jones purchased a strip of land at Piney Woods off Route 49 in Rankin County south of Jackson, Mississippi. His plan was to build a schoolhouse. Starting with little money, he built a small shack. One or two students were taken in at first but as Jones' good fortune increased, he added more children. After a while the shack had grown into a mixed boarding school. All kinds of children were taken in—black, white, Chinese, Indian, children on crutches or confined to wheelchairs.

Everyone was given an equal chance at getting a well-rounded education. Jones envisioned a school equal to what Fisk or Tuskegee had to offer. Its choral group, the Cotton Blossom Singers, became the centrepiece of the institution. Jones kept the choral group going throughout the life of the school. Different gatherings of singers came and went. A blind school was started in the late 1920s. The six-year-old Archie Brownlee, born October 19, 1925 in Turrell, Arkansas, was enrolled in 1931. Soon thereafter, Lloyd Lee Woodard, born August 21, 1928 in Mississippi, Joseph Ford, born December 4, 1916, and Lawrence M. Abrams joined him.

The Cotton Blossom Singers were often sent out to sing folk melodies and popular songs at socials and suppers given by well-heeled white folk to raise money for the school. The four aforementioned blind students sang around the school and rendered pop songs for the children in class. Alan Lomax, on behalf of the Library of Congress music archives, visited Piney Woods School in March 1937. He was impressed with the blind students and recorded them in two groups on Tuesday, March 9th. The first group composed of Lawrence M. Abrams, Lloyd Lee Woodard and Alzea (Isiah) Patterson, recorded three old, traditional folk tunes, two about rabbits and one entitled "Steal her, golden boy." They were recorded under the label copy L.M. Abraham.

The second outfit, composed of Archie Brownlee, Joseph Ford, Jesse Brown and Lloyd Lee Woodard, recorded "I been 'buked and I been scorned." They were label-copied as The Four Blind Boys. Having access to a radio, the blind students listened to songs by the Mills Brothers and Golden Gate quartet and began to imitate their vocal arrangements. Brownlee, Patterson, Ford, Abrams, Brown and Woodard all became the

first blind Cotton Blossom Singers group to tour for the school. They played memorial clubs and the Lions and Kiwanis Clubs, ventured into Indian reservations in North Dakota, sang at schools, churches, in rich white people's homes, large theatres and on military bases.

A variety of managers had them booked away from school for three or four months at a stretch. The managers made all the arrangements, tallied the receipts, and invariably kept all the cash. The blind boys wanted this to change. They felt they deserved more money in their pockets and could not wait for graduation to do something about it. Woodard, being the oldest, was the first to graduate and go on to Jackson State College. He decided to stay with his sister in Jackson who supplied both housing and financial support. It was she who suggested that the Cotton Blossom Singers go out as a gospel-singing group. She came up with the name Jackson Harmoneers (after the closest large city.)

Abrams went to work at the Vocational Rehabilitation Department in Jackson. The blind boys, their minds made up, decided to go out as a semi-professional gospel quartet. This meant that not only were they singing pop to white audiences in the Cotton Blossoms but also going out for themselves singing gospel in black churches as the Jackson Harmoneers. As members were tied to Jackson for economic reasons, the Jackson Harmoneers restricted their gospel engagements to the local area.

When Brownlee graduated high school and Woodard finished college, the Jackson Harmoneers (Brownlee, Abrams, Woodard and Ford) decided to go professional. After picking up Melvin Henderson as second lead, the outfit moved base of operations south to New Orleans. By now they had developed a more aggressive style, one that differed from the strictures of jubilee. The New Orleans Chosen Five, a.k.a. Soprocco Singers with whom the blind boys shared the airwaves at WWL, were instrumental in having the blind boys come to terms with this new, more exciting trend in gospel quartets coming out of the South.

Brownlee had long admired Soul Stirrers lead Rebert H. Harris. His devotion was such that Brownlee had taken Harris as his spiritual guide and mentor. Good fortune had it that Brownlee and the boys would soon meet up with the Soul Stirrers in Chicago. In 1945 Henderson's brother had the Jackson Harmoneers booked on a program with all the top quartets in Chicago. In the Windy City Brownlee and the group experienced the Blue Jays and Soul Stirrers in action. Switch-leads would play off each other to build emotional energy, which resulted in a devastating climax at the close of each song. Brownlee learned a good deal that day.

With the departure of Melvin Henderson, the Jackson Harmoneers saw their opportunity to hire a strong "hard" singer experienced enough to jet-fuel the group with the right amount of sanctification they were looking for. Percell Perkins, born February 6, 1917 in Duncan, Mississippi, came aboard and the Jackson Harmoneers became a powerful force to be reckoned with. Perkins had sung in many of the leading groups of the day, including the Glory Bound Singers and the Fairfield Four. He was singing with the New Orleans Chosen Four in Chicago when the Jackson Harmoneers met up with them again.

The group persuaded the sighted Perkins to become manager, trainer, baritone and second lead. When Perkins joined the group, Abrams was filling in on second lead. After taking the group back to New Orleans, Perkins taught Brownlee the rudiments of switching swing lead. The Jackson Harmoneers, a.k.a. the Sensational Blind Boys, began to travel extensively. They wound up in Cleveland and made the city their base for about a year. In Cleveland they met up with Leon René whose brother Otis ran the Excelsior label on South Gramercy in Los Angeles. The Sensational Blind Boys were invited out to California to record and while living in Oakland cut four records under the Jackson Harmoneers soubriquet for Excelsior starting in late 1946.

The Sensational Blind boys stayed for the most part at the Carver Hotel on Fourteenth and Market Street in Oakland. Early engagements took place at the tiny Boilermakers Hall. When news spread, as many congregants stood outside as were packed tightly inside. The Sensational Blind Boys became extremely popular around the East Bay area after Rev. George W. Killens; minister with the Mount Calvary Baptist Church gave them their initial boost.

Although as an early independent, Excelsior Records was able to cut into white markets, they did not successfully launch the Sensational Blind Boys beyond race boundaries. In 1948 booking manager Johnny Myers got the group into New York's Golden Gate Auditorium where they opened for their old role models, the Golden Gate Quartet. The midnight show was packed to overflowing. News spread and the group acquired much positive publicity.

Next stop was Newark where promoter Ronnie Williams had them booked at the Laurel Gardens where they battled for triumphant audience approval against the Blind Boys of Alabama (see ACMCD4204 – The Five Blind Boys Of Alabama.) While in New Jersey they picked up a new manager, Solomon Grant from Trenton. They stayed at The Coleman Hotel in Newark, managed by Melvin Coleman, baritone singer with the 1932 evolvement of the Coleman Brothers who were all shareholders of the building and proprietors of The Coleman Record Company set up in the basement (seeACMCD 4080 – The Coleman Bros. for details.) Melvin, who had caught the quartet's program at Laurel Gardens, had the group record for Coleman twice, once in February 1948 and then again almost a year later. They were label-copied as The Five Blind Boys. Most of the recorded songs were widely popular among nationally acclaimed quartets at the time. Only "Never turn back," a Thomas A. Dorsey composition, found itself on the market along with a version recorded for Coleman by the Colemans themselves. As to who sold more copies, it is hard to tell. Distribution was a major problem for Coleman.

Shortly after the group's second Coleman session, Joseph Ford, who was tired of life on the road, quit and returned to Jackson. He was replaced by basso John T. Clinkscales, born in South Carolina. Having moved to Cincinnati as a child, he served in many quartets, the last being the seven-member Volunteer Gospel Singers. None of these quartets ever recorded.

Some time during early 1950 the Five Blind Boys relocated to Houston, Texas. Having paid a visit to Don Robey of Peacock Records on Lyons Avenue, they were able to secure a five-year contract. News had spread via New Orleans and on the California coast that the Five Blind Boys were a hot item. Robey, after only being in the recording business for five months and having recorded guitar blues, Crescent City blues & rhythm, Kansas City big bands, plus a smattering of rolling piano blues, was ready to venture into Southern-style gospel quartet. His immediate competitor was Art Rupe at Specialty in Hollywood who had Kylo Turner & the Pilgrim Travelers under contract.

The Travelers had developed a walking-in-rhythm style by simply stomping their feet in time. Rhythm accompaniment outside of perhaps piano and/or organ had not been utilized extensively up to this point on quartet recordings. Robey had in mind to use rhythm accompaniment in gospel as he would in blues & rhythm, but only to pronounce timing as the Pilgrim Travelers had done with their feet.
Label-copied as The Original Five Blind Boys, the group held their first Peacock session without accompaniment in March 1950. Billboard almost immediately trumpeted the arrival of the World Famous 5 Blind Boys-Jackson Harmoneers Religious group with almost a quarter-page ad and photographs the month of the first release. Quite clearly Robey had big plans for the quartet. Two releases were issued at once, and both sold well in Southern markets like Atlanta, Shreveport, Dallas and New Orleans.

By August 1950, Rev. Percell Perkins, having quit to go with the Swan Silvertones, had been replaced by the volatile Vance "Tiny" Powell from the Paramount Gospel Singers of San Francisco. Powell, born in Warren, Arkansas in 1922, had sung with many gospel quartets in Kansas City, Detroit, Cleveland, New Orleans and Oakland before coming to the Blind Boys. Both Powell and Brownlee possessed strong spirit-killing voices that when added to tough-minded personalities created friction down the line (see my liner notes to "Heaven in My View – The Tiny Powell Collection – Withasongtoo, 2000.)

In September 1950 the group concluded their second Peacock session. Again a large ad was placed in Billboard, this time with the un-photographed group relegated to

the foot, announced in bold type as The Five Blind Boys (The Original Favourites) Jackson Harmoneers with Touching Spiritual of "Our Father" backed by "Move in the room with the Lord."

By November "Our Father" had become the hottest "spiritual" in New Orleans. Strong competition was encountered with Mahalia Jackson's "Just over the hill" and "The Lord's Prayer" by the Orioles, but the Blind Boys quite clearly had made a runaway best seller. "Our Father" put Peacock's spiritual endeavours into the big time. By March 1951, Irving Marcus, Peacock's sales manager, had expanded markets to include Florida, the Carolinas, Chicago and most of the Eastern Seaboard. A follow-up, "He's my rock" from the second session (given a four-star rating in Billboard) was rushed into release. But the record did not catch the same coin as "Our Father" which burst into Billboard's R&B and Juke Box charts, resting at #10 during December 1950 (after only three months in release.)

Only Red Foley's "Peace in the valley" penetrated Billboard's R&B charts almost a year later. Robey himself ascribed the success of "Our Father" to the addition of "heavy" drums—the pronounced timing Robey had intended using back in early 1950. The Original Five Blind Boys now played much larger venues, like ballparks and city auditoriums.

After "Old ship of Zion" was recorded in April 1951, it looked like breaking big in May when it started to sell well in New Orleans, but the chart never quite made it. Robey tried other ploys to put the Blind Boys more strongly across. He recorded them behind Sister Jessie Mae Renfro on her hit recording "He's so wonderful" and supporting Rev. I.H. Gordon, a mediocre soloist, on "Dr. Jesus" in June 1951. The Original Five Blind Boys continued to sell well for Peacock, but all of Robey's efforts to persuade Brownlee to go secular failed miserably.

In May 1952 the group recorded two fiery songs written by Bro. Cecil Shaw -- "Will Jesus be waiting for me" and "I was praying." This is worth mentioning because the Houston-based Bro. Cecil Shaw (otherwise known as the Joe Louis of Gospel) was at the peak of his vocal powers in 1952 and to this day holds the singular distinction of being the only gospel singer Archie Brownlee has refused to follow at a concert (see ACMCD4200 Brother Cecil Shaw). The only other time the Original Five Blind Boys were badly beaten out was way back at the start of their professional career in Jackson, Mississippi when they came up against the Southern Sons, Jackson's hottest group at the time. But then it was upsets like this that shaped and improved the Blind Boys, helped make them invincible and one of the most revered quartets ever to lighten the concert stage.

Archie Brownlee died in New Orleans on February 8, 1960. The cause of death was given as a lengthy bout of pneumonia. Two powerful soloists, Roscoe Robinson and Willmer "Little Ax" Broadnax, took his place. Lloyd Lee Woodard died in Mississippi in July 1973. Lawrence "Shorty" Abrams passed in August 1982 in Charleston, S.C. Rev. Percell L. Perkins succumbed in Helena, Arkansas on January 21, 2003.

The Five Blind Boys of Mississippi continue on today under the stewardship of Sandy Foster of Cincinnati.

--- Opal Louis Nations *March 2006*

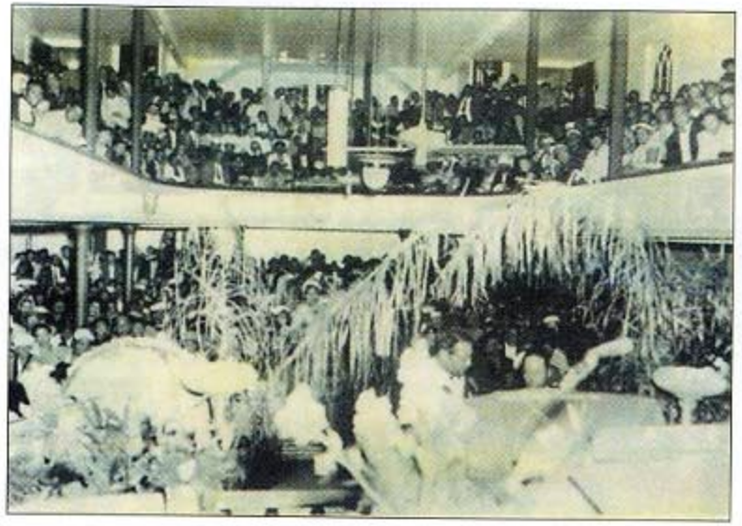

Photo 2

Photo credits;

Cover Photo: Original 5 Blind Boys of Mississippi (Zoltan)

Photo 1: from Archie Brownlee Funeral program (Zoltan)

Photo 2: Archie Brownlee - Wake (#1) - Zoltan)

CD1

Archie Brownlee, Lawrence Abrams (tenors); Re. Percell Perkins, Lloyd Woodard (baritones); Joseph Ford (bass). Oakland, California c. 1947

1. I'M STANDING IN THE SAFETY ZONE EXCELSIOR 184
2. THE LORD WILL MAKE A WAY
3. JOHN SAW THE HOLY NUMBER EXCELSIOR 185
4. LORD I'M TIRED
5. I'LL NEVER TURN BACK EXCELSIOR 186
6. JESUS WILL HELP ME
7. I MUST TELL JESUS EXCELSIOR 187
8. I WANT WINGS

As above Newark c. 1948

9. WORKING ON THE BUILDING COLEMAN 5968
10. YOU GOT TO MOVE
11. JESUS TRAVELLED THIS ROAD BEFORE COLEMAN 5983
12. MUST BE GOD SOMEWHERE
13. NEVER TURN BACK COLEMAN 5984
14. WHEN GOD DIPS HIS PEN OF LOVE

As above except J.T. Clinkscales (bass) replaces Joseph Ford and on * Vance Powell (tenor) replaces Rev. Percell Perkins. c. April-September 1950

15. ONE OF THESE DAYS PEACOCK 1535
16. SOMETHING WITHIN ME
17. AMAZING GRACE PEACOCK 1536
18. JESUS GAVE ME WATER
19. MOVE IN THE ROOM OF THE LORD* PEACOCK 1550
20. OUR FATHER*
21. HE'S MY ROCK* PEACOCK 1551
22. I'VE GOT A RIGHT (Thompson)

CD2

Archie Brownlee, Lawrence Abrams (tenors); Rev. Percell Perkins, Lloyd Woodard (baritones); J.T. Clinkscales (bass). Cesta Ayres - narration*/ Rev Samuel K. Lewis-narration**. April 1951

1. IN THIS WORLD ALONE PEACOCK 1552 (Brownlee-Robey)
2. OLD SHIP OF ZION (Brownlee-Robey)

April 1952

3. HOW FAR AM I FROM CANAAN PEACOCK 1553 (Brownlee-Robey)
4. WORLD PRAYER** (Rochlin)

c. June/July 1951

Rev. I.H. Gordon, Archie Brownlee (lead vocals); with Vance Powel, Lawrence Abrams, Lloyd Woodard, John T. Clinkscales; unk. piano, organ, drums.

5. DR. JESUS PEACOCK 1573 (Brownlee)

June 1951

6. COMING HOME* PEACOCK 1580 (Brownlee-Robey)
7. MOTHER DON'T WORRY (Brownlee-Robey)
8. GOD LEADS LITTLE CHILDREN PEACOCK 1701 (Brownlee-Robey)

May 1952

9. PRECIOUS MEMORIES (Robey-Shaw)
10. I WAS PRAYING PEACOCK 1706 (Robey-Shaw)
11. WILL JESUS BE WAITING FOR ME (Robey-Shaw)

May 1953

12. I KNOW THE LORD WILL MAKE A WAY PEACOCK 1714 (Brownlee-Robey)
13. SOMEWHERE LISTENING FOR MY NAME (Brownlee-Robey)

December 1953

14. JESUS IS A ROCK IN A WEARY LAND PEACOCK 1723 (Brownlee-Robey)
15. SONG OF PRAISE (Brownlee-Robey)

April 1954

16. ALL ABOARD PEACOCK 1731 (Brownlee)
17. I WONDER, DO YOU (Brownlee)

September 1954

18. HAVE YOU TALKED TO THE MAN UPSTAIRS PEACOCK 1735 (Brownlee)
19. IN THE GARDEN (Brownlee)

Archie Brownlee, Vance Powell, Lawrence Abrams (tenors); Rev. Percell Perkins, Lloyd Woodard (baritones); J.T. Clinkscales (bass). c. September 1950

20. (I'LL BE) IN THE WILDERNESS PEACOCK 1747 (Brownlee)

as September 1954

21. THINK OF HIS GOODNESS (Walker)

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.