avi
ENTERTAINMENT GROUP, INC.

NASH4512-2 Printed in U.S.A. ©1995 Nashboro Records

NASHBORO Records

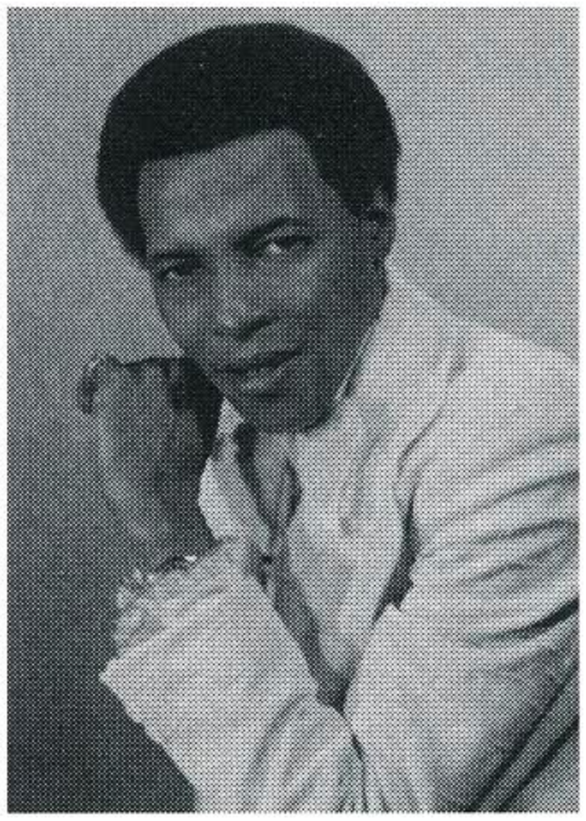
THE BEST OF

TOMMY ELLISON & THE FIVE SINGING STARS

featuring SAILING

Tommy Ellison & The Five Singing Stars

The art of The Five Singing Stars is best described in the liner notes to the "Love, Peace, and Happiness" album (Nashboro 7208, 1978). "The group have (sic.) the musical ability and artifice of combining vocal or instrumental sounds or tones in varying melody, harmony, rhythm, and timbre, especially so as to form structurally complete and emotionally expressive compositions."



Washington-based Tommy Ellison & The Five Singing Stars are super nova in the gospel pantheon who continue to excite audiences wherever or whenever they perform across the length and breadth of the nations. Tommy Ellison, lead singer and guiding light of the group, has a long and illustrious recording career stretching back more than forty years. Born September 15, 1932 in the small country town of Wagner, South Carolina, Ellison frequented the Smyner Baptist Church of Wagner, a church he attends to this day. Growing up, he sang in the Smyner choir and formed the first local (the fellas rarely sang outside the country) Five Singing Stars group. Members included himself, Deacon Hotwell, lead, Julius Zigler, Johnny Christmas, and David Chatman, all local boys.

Ellison's professional career started with the late Mdm. Edna Gallmon Cooke's coming to town with Barney Parks, ex-Dixie Hummingbird and manager of both Mdm. Cooke and The Sensational Nightingales of South Carolina. Parks had Ellison audition with Willie Banks and The Singing Sons, a male group then touring with Mdm. Cooke. The Sons not only sang background behind Cooke but performed in their own name to open her program.

The Singing Sons date back to the late Forties when they recorded for Decca. Founding member Dave Edrington and Reverend Julius Cheeks split away to form The Sensational Nightingales, as did Horace Thompson at a later date. Ellison stayed with The Singing Sons until Parks reorganized The Sensational Nightingales. This took place after the temporary defection of The Reverend Julius Cheeks to The Soul Stirrers in 1954. Ellison replaced Cheeks in the "Gales" and sang lead alongside Bill Woodruff, baritone, Jo Jo Wallace, tenor and guitar, Ernest James, second lead tenor, and John Jefferson, bass.

In early 1955, Thomas Mobley, short-serving tenor singer with The Harmonizing Four of Richmond, Virginia, left the group to join Margaret Allison and The Angelic Gospel Singers. The Harmonizing Four were further hampered by the fact that James Walker, former lead singer, had quit to join The Dixie Hummingbirds. Ellison enlisted with The Harmonizing Four and can be heard singing second lead on "I found the Lord" issued by Gotham in 1955. Ellison left The Harmonizing Four after only a few months and joined The Chosen Gospel Singers out of Los Angeles. Ellison sang second lead alongside Robert Crutcher, the group's charismatic lead tenor from Brooklyn. Ellison cut three singles with The Chosen Gospel Singers on Nashboro between the fall of 1955 and January 1957.

The reincarnation of The Five Singing Stars took over two years to come about. By 1959, Ellison had pulled together his own group and rehearsed them so that they were ready to record. Members included Roosevelt Walker, high tenor and guitar, Clarence Robinson, baritone, Eli Evans, tenor, and Bill Whitty, bass. In 1960, The Five Singing Stars caught the attention of Bobby Robinson, Harlem-based R&B music legend and proprietor of the fledgling Revelation gospel label. On Revelation Ellison and the group cut the soul-wrenching "If I live right." Three further song selections from the session were later issued on a budget album. Months after this, Ellison hooked up with Don Robey at Peacock Records in Houston for whom The Five Singing Stars recorded four barn storming singles.

In 1968, old friend "Speedy" Warwick introduced Ellison to Hob Records, then one of the leading new gospel affiliates in the country. Between 1968 and 1970, Hob released one single and one album on the group. It was during this period that The Five Singing Stars served as backing group on James Carter's two singles releases, one for Delta, the other for World Wide. Both are extremely rare items to find. The group then recorded briefly for the

H.S.E. label. Some time around the early 1970s, Ellison and the outfit pacted with Nashboro Records. The initial recording group included Sam Williams, top tenor and guitar, Billy Hardy, lead and tenor, Perry Taff, lead, Oscar Hardnick, John Carr, Charlie Baker, plus Henry and Anthony Williams.

The Five Singing Stars cut nine albums over a period of ten years for Nashboro. On "Sunshine" (Nashboro LP 7214, 1974), one of Ellison's best selling collections, The Five Singing Stars are joined by a female outfit called The Gospel Warriors of Washington, D.C., a group with whom they frequently appeared in live performances. Ellison tried his hand as a solo act for a while but missed the quartet tradition and later returned to The Five Singing Stars.

Our set begins appropriately with "The Singing Stars' prayer," an opening testimony set to soft, lilting harmonies whereon the group members are introduced to the listening audience by Billy Hardy who continues on to present a roll call of Nashboro gospel stars. Ellison works his magic on "Love, peace and happiness." The song opens with testimony followed by a few bars of soothing harmony. "Lord, don't leave me alone" tells a test of faith story of a man who inadvertently buys flowers for a little boy's mother's grave when wiring Mother's Day roses to his own mom. The set continues with"Straighten up" from the "Love Peace and Happiness" album.

Songs that told stories in the form of a sermonette grew widely popular in the Sixties and Seventies when fables and tales recorded by Shirley Caesar and Dorothy Norwood found wide public interest. The song-story form is again evoked on "God loves you" with The Singing Stars wailing like a backwash of exalted angels. Ellison taunts and testifies as the concerted voices intensify on each ongoing chorus. The Five Singing Stars are joined by The Gospel Warriors on the traditional "Steal away," beautifully rendered in Ellison's typically ragged fashion. The story builds to a furnaced climax with lead and singers pushing to the max

The power of prayer is acclaimed on a tough readin of "I need you right now," a complex arrangement for both Stars an Warriors as well as keyboard accompanist. "Sailing," as well a being a enormous hit for The Five Singing Star is one of the group's prime churc wreckers. Nothing moves the "sisters" int a state of absolute bliss than "Sailing" with its soli beat and testimonial rest stops. The soul touched with the seductive "Rain in your lif (Sunshine.)" Ellison and fellow lead soloists ge down bad on this tear-stained testimon

A tender refrain is again struc in the affecting passages of "My love for God. Ellison sermonizes, taunts, and cajole his way along while wrestling with a anguished spirit. More solid, bone-shakin workout is provoked on "Get on the floo and serve the Lord." "Finally got myself together" finc The Stars wailing to manic piano figures and complex disco-danc rhythms. The lyrisc tell of how the sinner saw the error o his ways and saved himself in the nick of time . Th thought of eternal damnation does it , every time

The Five Singing Stars give a winning run-throug of "Been in the storm too long," one of the strongest version ever to make it to magnetic tape. Our songfest close with "The crossroads," a which-way-to-go song supporte by washy keyboards and robust singing fro The Gospel Warriors who lift it out of gravity

Ellison and the boys are currently signe with AIR (Atlanta International Records.) Prevailin members of the quartet include old buddies Sam William and Oscar Hardnick plus Dennie Bowers

— Opal L. Nations - March, 1995

Executive Producers
Patti Drosins and Rob Santos

Reissue produced by
Robert Y. Kim and
Opal Louis Nations

Originally produced by
Shannon Williams

Art Direction/Design by
Mitchell Kanner

Liner notes by Opal Louis Nations

Mastered by Walter DeVenne

Original photos courtesy of
AVI Archives

Project Assistant
Michael Russell

Special Thanks
Ray Funk, Shannon Williams