Flying Clouds of Detroit

Flying Cloud Quintette

Broadcast each Sunday at 9:00 a. m. Station WJLB; and Sunday 3:00 p. m., Monday 9:00 p. m., Thursday 2:15 a. m. Station CKLW

H. Harris, Manager
L. Ervin, Baritone
J. Evans, 2nd Tenor
R. Thomas, Bass
J. Union, 2nd Tenor
L. Lewis, 1st Tenor

12228 Dequindre St. Phone TOwnsend 6-2857 Detroit, Mich.

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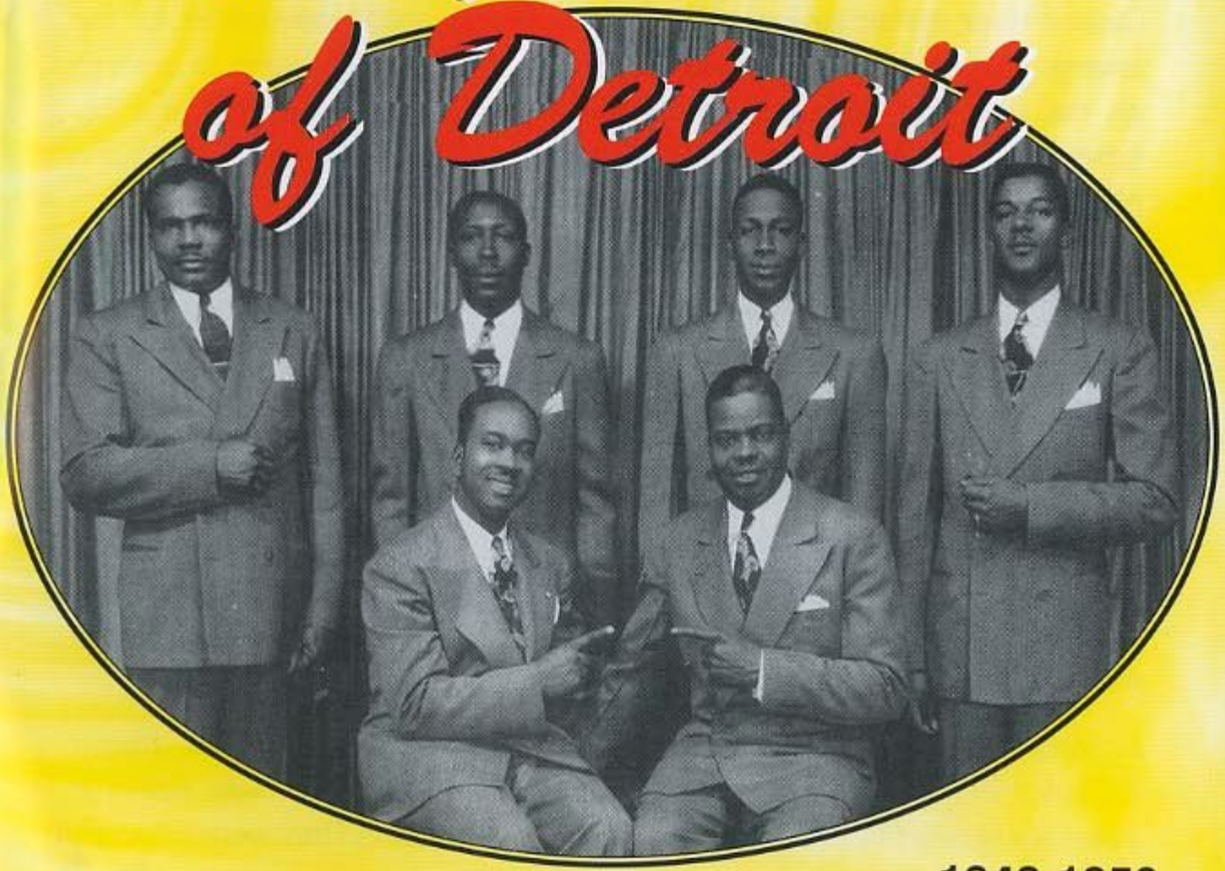


1942-1950

The Flying Clouds of Detroit during their heyday (1940s and early 1950s) were the strongest singing jubilee-based quartet in the Wolverine State, rivaled only by Oliver Green & The Evangelist Singers who later evolved into the Detroiters. During the 1930s, Paradise Valley, a subdivision north of the Detroit River skirted by East Warren Street, became the new center for the emerging popular African-American music culture. Pivotal figures to emerge on the post-war Detroit gospel scene included Aretha Franklin and her father, Rev. C.L. Franklin, Mattie Clark and her daughters, the Clark Sisters, the Meditations and the Testimonials (Winnans).

Back in the depths of the Depression half the African-American auto plant workers were out of work. A gradual economic recovery and the establishment of black cultural enterprises brought a flourish of musical activity. Jazz pianist Milt Jackson remembers going out with his gospel-singing family, the Jackson Brothers, based at The C.O.G.I.C. on Adelaide Street. "The Jacksons played all the black churches including the long-established Pentecostal places of worship. At the Plymouth Congregational we won ten dollars in a sing-off contest," says Jackson ("Before Motown: A History of Jazz in Detroit, 1920-1960," Lars Bjorn, The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2001.)

According to Prof. Horace Boyer in his book "How Sweet The Sound" (Elliott & Clark, 1995), the Flying Clouds, like the Fairfield Four of Nashville, began as a teenage quartet in 1929 at the start of the Depression. They were originally

called the Russell Street Usher Board Four for their benefactors, the Usher Board of the Russell Street Baptist Church situated in the heart of Paradise Valley. Personnel changed often in the early days.

Second tenor and only surviving original Flying Cloud, John T. Evans, remembers a fellow named Curry (first tenor), baritone Robert Ross and basso Horace Sirmans and himself being in one of the earliest configurations of the 1930s. In 1933 Henry Harris joined the group as manager, and the outfit played local churches. Harris owned a seven-seater sedan. Their reputation grew by leaps and bounds, and by 1942 they had adopted the Flying Clouds moniker. The name came from a popular automobile of the time.

"I remember back in 1936, the group came around to my house at five in the morning to try to get me to join. They were on tour to somewhere and needed a lead tenor. I turned them down, but I did start going to rehearsals when they came back," says Evans. Harris, a smooth-talking promoter, got the Flying Clouds singing on many major gospel programs aside from the odd sick room visits and homes of personal friends. "We entered harmony contests," says Evans. "These

contests were often judged by big-shots out of Wayne University. None of us had had any music training. We picked up our parts by ear. We were told that the reason why we won the harmony contests so often was that we sang closer than singers who had had coaching. Our first concerts were for free, but when it cost us some to get to a program we started charging ten cents a head."

Ray Funk states in his liner notes to Detroit Gospel (Gospel Heritage LP HT 311) that by the late 1930s the Flying Clouds were traveling to places like Chicago, St. Louis and Cincinnati on extended weekends. "We all worked at the auto plants during the day and had families, so we didn't want to stay away from home too long," says Evans. "We used to stand still on stage, like most jubilee singers, until Joe Union and later on Elmer Stallworth came along. Then we started kicking benches and moving around."

According to Funk, Union, a strong, impressive, emotional singer, came from the Loving Brothers out of Omaha, Nebraska. He joined the Flying Clouds in 1940. Elmer Stallworth of the Friendly Brothers was brought from St. Louis into the group in 1946. Union's tenure with the group was short. He died suddenly from pneumonia while on tour in Knoxville, Tennessee in 1941. "We all looked sharp on stage," recalls Evans, "patent leather shoes and at least eight different uniforms. These included long-tailed gray tuxedos, short, black tuxedos and white suits. We were all around six feet tall and looked real good."

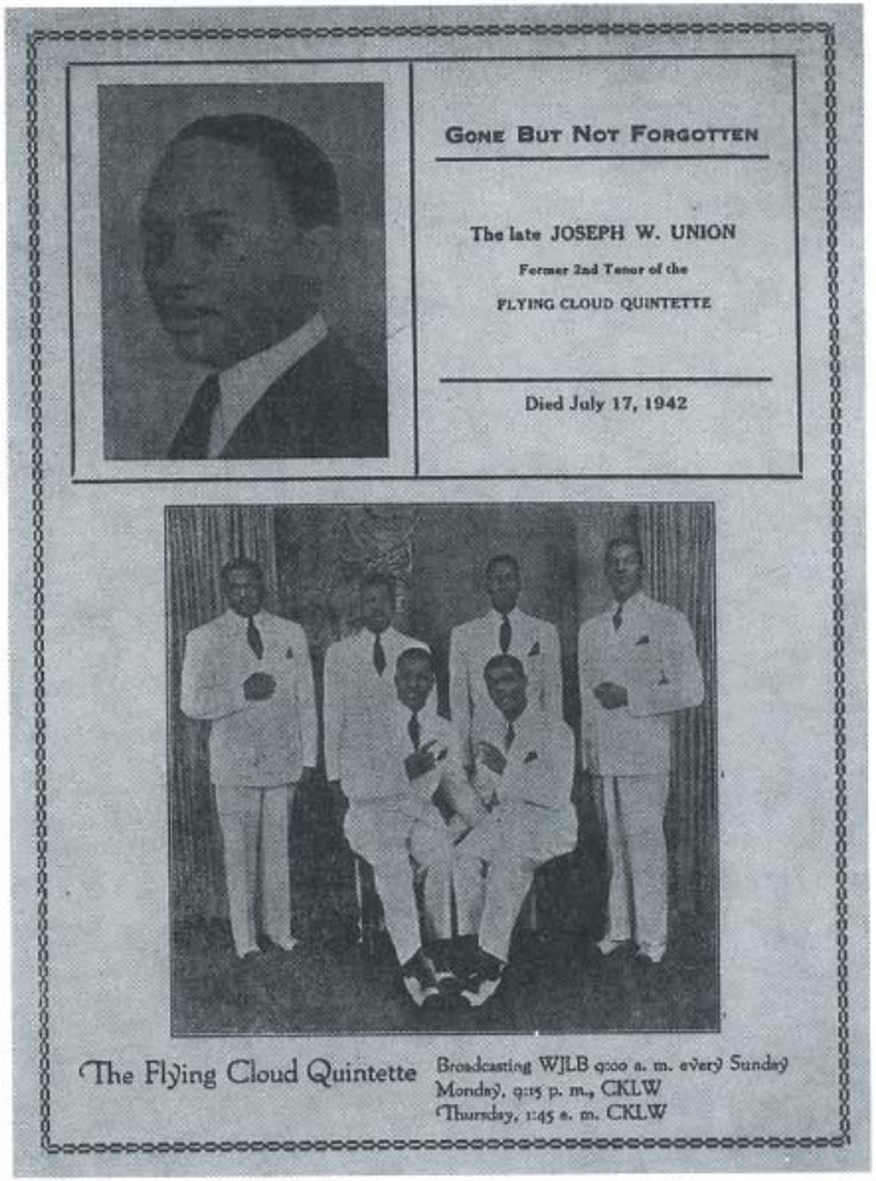
1940 also saw the beginning of the Flying Clouds' radio career. "Joseph Campau of CKLW in Windsor, Ontario, was looking for a gospel quartet to background Elder C.L. Morton's Wednesday midnight program," says Evans. "Eight groups signed up to audition, but when they heard us they took us on, after only listening to a few bars. We sang real close in those days." Elder C.L. Morton, who fathered two sons (both became ministers), also broadcast from the pulpit of his church. The Flying Clouds were asked to share this program, too. Herbert "Pee Wee" Pickard, pianist with the Gospel Harmonettes, remembers the Flying Clouds on WJLB in Detroit. "They had a regular program Sunday morning at nine a.m., and we had one after them." Pee Wee was then pianist with the United Gospel Singers.

The group ended up with two programs on CKLW, one at 9.15 p.m. on Mondays and the other on Thursdays at 1.45 a.m. With slight changes in program time, the Flying Clouds stayed on CKLW for many years.

Group personnel changed during the war years as the odd member was drafted. According to Funk, a number of strong singers, like basso Jimmy Ricks, lead shouter Tiny Powell, and Spirit of Memphis star Silas Steele passed through the group at various times. Steele can be heard leading on one of the few surviving radio transcriptions included on this CD. Tiny Powell took the number he sang in the Flying Clouds, "I want to move in the room with the Lord," to the Blind Boys of Mississippi who recorded it with him in 1950.

In May 1946, the Flying Clouds approached Bob Thiele of Haven Records, although (I suspect) due to advice given by Marie Knight, Henry Harris sent demos to Thiele who had just set up Haven and was looking for talent. Haven issued four extremely prized and now tough-to-find records by the Flying Clouds during 1946. The group at this point included Elmer A. Stallworth, first tenor, John T. Evans, second tenor, Anderson Lee Hall (from Dallas), tenor, Leon Milton Irving (Ervin) from the Silver Bells of Pittsburgh, baritone, and basso William "Windy" Turner from Arkansas. Charts included Elisha A. Hoffman's "I must tell Jesus," Joe Scriven's "What a friend" and Dorsey's "Peace in the valley," all standard jubilee fare, all rendered as closely as kittens in a crib. Strangely enough, Bob Thiele neglected to reissue these Flying Clouds sides on his Signature imprint in 1949 as he did with his other significant gospel artists on Haven.

In 1947 the Flying Clouds recorded two of their most popularly received sides for John W. Gilbert's Detroit-based Religious Recordings label. These were Fanny Crosby's "Savior don't pass me by" (Pass me not) and Lucie Campbell's "Something within me." Researcher Tony Heilbut considers the



Flying Clouds' reading of "Something within me" one of the great quartet tracks of the 1940s. The group's first Religious Recordings release, "Bye & bye," was sold to King Records who did nothing to broaden its popularity. Strange again is the fact that Henry Harris had the Flying Clouds signed to Ivin Ballen's Gotham Records on April 16, 1949.

The contract, which was originally prepared for the Silveraires of Philadelphia who had commenced recording for Gotham in January 1949, had had their name blacked out and the Flying Clouds' moniker written over it. Evans asserts that the group never recorded for Ballen, although he does recall being paid $25 per song per session around that time. This is the same rate of advanced royalty that Gotham usually shucked out.

Basso William Turner had quit the group at this point and was replaced by Luther Williams who stayed for approximately one year. In 1950 baritone Leon Milton Irving (Ervin) died and was replaced by James Copeland. Basso Porterfield Lewis from the famous Birmingham quartet, the Heavenly Gospel Singers, replaced Williams. Additional information in Funk's liner notes convey that WHAM, a TV station in Rochester, N.Y., offered the Flying Clouds a long-term contract if they would move to Rochester. This produced a split in the ranks, and Stallworth took Hall, Irving (Ervin) and Turner with him to Rochester where they became the Mello-aires who recorded one record for Gotham. They disbanded shortly thereafter. Stallworth and Turner then entered the ministry. Hall and Stallworth returned to the fold for the King

session of April 1950 and Irving (Ervin) died in Rochester.

During a series of engagements that took the group to Cincinnati in April 1950 the Flying Clouds recorded only one session for Syd Nathan's King Records. It is interesting to note that the quartet sang a-cappella into the mid-Fifties, a half decade or so after most other quartets sang to musical instrumentation. This refutes the statement that guitarist James H. Gooch of the Matchless Love Gospel Singers made when he said he played for the Flying Clouds during the late 1940s.

An item in a February 1950 Billboard states that the Flying Clouds appeared on WOOK's first year celebration in Washington, D.C., on February 12 at the Union Hall, hosted by Ethel L. Young. Despite this, the Flying Clouds had to wait almost three years before appearing on record again. They cut one session with Leroy Barnes of the Evangelist Singers for Ernie Young's Nashville-based Nashboro imprint in April 1953.

The Flying Clouds disappeared again for four years before showing up on Joe Von Battle's JVB label in 1957. By now, only Stallworth, Evans and Lewis had

survived numerous changes, and Willie Banks plus a tenor soldier remembered only as Simms made up the aggregation. This group recorded two fine releases (one reissued on Checker), backed by Washboard Willie on washboard and Calvin Frazier on guitar. Willie Banks went on to join the Jackson Southernaires in 1963. Beginning as far back as 1950, Flying Clouds-named groups sprang up all over the country, principally in Florida, New York, California, Alabama and South Carolina. "There were so many Flying Clouds groups around I had to register the name," says Evans.

More Flying Clouds sides were recorded in back of Battle's record store on Hastings Street, just a short walk from where the group first started out. Most of these were sold to the Chess Brothers who never issued them. A less than satisfactory end to a group who never developed a national reputation but who are nevertheless remembered with reverence by those who went out to see them work their magic as one of the truly great a-cappella quartets of gospel's Golden Age.

Opal Louis Nations, August 2001 • © 2001

Thanks to Deborah Smith-Pollard, prof. Horace Boyer, Ray Funk and John T. Evans for their invaluable assistance.