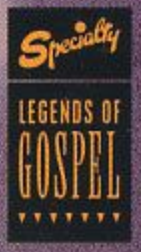
Golden Age Gospel Quartets

THE SOUTHERN HARMONIZERS
THE PILGRIM TRAVELERS

THE GOLDEN ECHOES
THE PARAMOUNT SINGERS
THE SOUL STIRRERS

THE DETROITERS
THE CHOSEN GOSPEL SINGERS
THE SWAN SILVERTONES
THE ORIGINAL FIVE BLIND BOYS OF ALABAMA
THE WEST COAST JUBILEES

Volume One — 1947-1954



The late 1940s ushered in a Golden Age of quartet gospel singing in which the earlier close-knit jubilee sound gave way to a harder edged, more extroverted approach. The jubilee style, as associated with such prominent pre–World War II groups as the Golden Gate Quartet, Selah Jubilee Singers, Norfolk Jubilee Quartet, and Dixie Hummingbirds, is characterized by "moderate to rapid tempo; short vocal phrasing; [and] major harmonies," in the words Horace Clarence Boyer, professor of music at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

The Soul Stirrers, formed in Trinity, Texas in 1926 and based in Chicago since 1937, were the first true gospel quartet, having incorporated the compositions of Thomas A. Dorsey and other pioneering gospel songwriters into their repertoire. The Soul Stirrers were a five-man "quartet" that featured two lead singers, instead of the usual one—another innovation that influenced such emerging post-war quartets as the Five Blind Boys of Mississippi, Pilgrim Travelers, Swan Silvertones, Paramount Singers, and even the Dixie Hummingbirds.

This collection of quartet performances made between 1947 and 1954 draws on material from the archives of Specialty Records, a Hollywood-based company that was a prime purveyor of gospel music during the genre's Golden Age, while the companion *Golden Age Gospel Quartets, Volume 2* (1954-63) (Specialty SPCD-7070-2) combines Specialty recordings with some from Tru-Sound and Battle, two relatively short-lived New York labels of the early Sixties. The selections are presented in roughly chronological order to better provide an overview of the changes in gospel quartet styles during this 16-year span. Perhaps the most significant of these was the transition from a cappella or near–a cappella singing to the almost obligatory use of full rhythm sections that took place in the mid-Fifties.

A pianist named Essie Hayden accompanied the Southern Harmonizers, the first artists ever to appear on Specialty Records, on "These Old Bones" and "What Are They Doing," taken from a six-song session held in December 1947. Nothing else is known about the quartet. No paperwork on the Southern Harmonizers exists in the Specialty files, nor do metal master discs, thus necessitating the use of rare 78s for the reissue of the two tracks at hand. "These Old Bones" is a jubilee-style novelty number of a type that soon passed from fashion among African-American quartets but was adopted during the Fifties by the Statesmen and other Southern white quartets. "What Are They Doing in Heaven Today?" closely follows the Golden Gate Quartet's 1938 Bluebird recording of the Charles A. Tindley composition.

If the Southern Harmonizers sides had negligible commercial impact, the Pilgrim Travelers' smooth gospel style found immediate favor among record-buyers in 1948 and made Specialty a major player in the Christian music marketplace. Formed in Houston in the early Thirties and located in Los Angeles beginning in 1942, the quartet was among the first to follow the Soul Stirrers' example by spotlighting two lead voices—the warmly resonant baritone of Kylo Turner and the sweetly soaring tenor of Keith Barber—both of whom are featured on the six selections included here. "The Old Rugged Cross" (1948), "He Will Remember Me" ('47 or '48), "Jesus Hits Like the Atom Bomb" ('50), and "Jesus, I'm Thankful" ('51) are performed entirely a cappella, while "Weary Traveler" and "My Old Home" (both from 1953) reflect the trend toward

rhythm section accompaniment.

Like the Pilgrim Travelers, the Golden Echoes started out in Houston and ended up in Los Angeles. Unlike the Travelers, whose prolific recording career spanned the years 1946 to 1971, the original Golden Echoes existed for only a few years, cutting sides for Coleman, Specialty, and Swing Time/Down Beat in 1948 and '49. The Echoes featured two of the most awesome lead singers in the gospel business—baritone Paul Foster (formerly of the Rising Stars and Paramount Singers) and tenor Wilmer "Little Axe" Broadnax (formerly of the Southern Gospel Singers)—emulating the Soul Stirrers' double-lead approach. They're heard here on "Since I Laid My Burden Down" (aka "Glory, Glory Hallelujah") and "Where Shall I Be (When the First Trumpet Sounds)?," both cut at the group's one Specialty session, in April 1949. By early 1950, the Golden Echoes were no more. Foster had joined the Soul Stirrers, with whom he would remain until 1963. Broadnax was less sedentary, jumping from the Spirit of Memphis to the Fairfield Four to the Five Blind Boys of Mississippi before forming an entirely different set of Golden Echoes that waxed four singles for Peacock in the mid-Sixties.

Formed in Austin, Texas in 1936, the Paramount Singers were one of the greatest of the early gospel quartets, though they achieved little national fame because they seldom performed outside the San Francisco Bay Area, where they'd relocated at the end of World War II. "He Means So Much to Me" and "Heaven in My View" both feature the marvelously elastic, emotion-gripping tenor of Vance "Tiny" Powell, who later sang briefly with the Five Blind Boys of Mississippi and in 1963 recorded the original version of the now-standard blues "My Time After While." Joseph Dean, who had replaced Paul Foster in the group, shares the lead with Powell on "Heaven in My View," which is driven by the pumping bass voice of Ben Williams. These two a cappella masterpieces were sent to Specialty as a demo, but the company passed on the Paramounts. The quartet, however, went on to record for Trilon, Coral, and Duke and resurfaced in 1992 with a CD on Arhoolie.

Specialty hit paydirt in 1950 by signing the Soul Stirrers. "Faith and Grace" and "By and By," both recorded that year, feature the stunningly melismatic tenor of R.H. Harris, a member of the group since 1936 and the most widely influential of all early gospel quartet leads. James Medlock is the first lead singer heard on the former song, while Paul Foster opens for Harris on the latter. Before 1950 was out, Harris had quit the Soul Stirrers and taken Medlock with him to form the Christland Singers, a move that did not sit well with Specialty owner Art Rupe—at least not in the beginning.

With two of the nation's most successful quartets under its belt—the Pilgrim Travelers and the Soul Stirrers—Specialty began signing up others. Organized in 1939 and originally known as the Evangelist Singers (under which name they cut the 1946 hit "Why I Like Roosevelt"), the Detroiters did two sessions for the label, in 1951 and '52, both with piano accompaniment by Nathaniel L. Howard. The jubilee-styled "Let Jesus Lead You" and the hypnotic "Mother, I Need Your Prayer" feature the gritty low tenor of Leroy Barnes, with leader Oliver Green providing the high-pitched second lead on the first of the two selections.

Rupe was displeased when the Soul Stirrers showed up for their third Specialty session, on March 1, 1951, with

an unknown 20-year-old in the place of the venerable R.H. Harris. Rupe's anxiety quickly calmed, however, when Sam Cooke opened his mouth to sing "Peace in the Valley," a Thomas A. Dorsey composition previously recorded by the Paramount Singers (in 1949) and by country singer Red Foley (in 1950). Cooke's intense reading of the song betrays the pronounced influence of predecessor Harris. By February 1953, when the anguished voice of Paul Foster led the Soul Stirrers in a spirited rendition of Kenneth Morris's "Christ Is All," they were no longer performing a cappella; pianist Faidest Wagoner was touring with the group and an organist and drummer were added for the session.

Yet another Houston-bred, Los Angeles–based quartet, the Chosen Gospel Singers were formed in 1950 and joined the Specialty roster two years later. The group's personnel fluctuated wildly during its three-year association with the company. "Before This Time Another Year" features the mournful tenor of E.J. Brumfield and the squalls of George Butler, while "Leaning on the Lord" finds Brumfield seconded by the eerie, vibrato-dripping tenor of Fred Sims. Both a cappella performances were cut in 1952.

Few gospel quartets boasted a finer harmony blend than the Swan Silvertones, formed in 1938 in Coalwood, West Virginia by coal miner Claude Jeter. After recording prolifically for King Records between 1946 and 1951, the Swans signed up with Specialty in 1952. The lovely a cappella "I'm Coming Home" is a showcase for Jeter's otherworldly high tenor. As was becoming the practice at Specialty, a drummer was added for the upbeat "He Won't Deny Me," which features the smooth tenor of Paul Owens and the rougher, quite urgent tones of Rev. Robert Crenshaw.

Clarence Fountain's group of vocalists, drawn from the ranks of Alabama's Talladega Institute for the Deaf and Blind Glee Club in 1937, were billed alternately as the Happyland Singers and as the Original Five Blind Boys of Alabama at the time they joined Specialty in 1952, though the former designation was soon dropped. The ever-effusive Fountain leads on "There Is a Fountain" and shares the vocal spotlight with Rev. Samuel K. Lewis and George Scott (who doubled as the group's guitarist) on "Marching Up to Zion," both songs dating from 1953. The Alabama Blind Boys proved one of the company's most popular groups and remained with Rupe until 1957.

Volume 1 of this two-CD retrospective closes with the only known recordings made by the West Coast Jubilees, a superb but little-known quartet from Long Beach, California. They were formed in 1945 by Rev. Presley Thomas, currently the pastor of Psalms of the Cross Temple on East Manchester Street in Los Angeles. A popular attraction around Southern California, the Jubilees were frequently called upon to perform on programs with touring gospel acts. The hard-edged "Since Jesus Came Into My Heart" features the lead vocals of Richard Wilike Richardson and Rev. Thomas, while the tension-building "He'll Be There" has Rev. Thomas seconding Ace H. Fletcher. Both songs were recorded during a concert, held at the Elks Auditorium in Los Angeles, probably in 1954, at which Specialty artists Brother Joe May, Dorothy Love Coates's Original Gospel Harmonettes, and the Swan Silvertones were the headliners. The West Coast Jubilees appointed themselves rather handsomely in such stellar surroundings.

—LEE HILDEBRAND AND OPAL NATIONS, 1997

The period from the mid-Forties through the Fifties has come to be regarded as the Golden Age of African-American gospel music. Specialty Records, founded in 1946 by Art Rupe, was one of the first companies to nurture this flowering of creativity and remained at the forefront of the genre for a decade and a half. The Pilgrim Travelers, the Soul Stirrers (featuring R.H. Harris, Sam Cooke, and Johnnie Taylor), Sister Wynona Carr, Brother Joe May, Dorothy Love Coates and the Original Gospel Harmonettes, the Original Five Blind Boys of Alabama, the Swan Silvertones, and Alex Bradford are only a few of the giants of gospel's Golden Age who were discovered and/or given wider exposure by Art Rupe. The Legends of Gospel Series salutes and celebrates some of these gospel stars who found their place in the history of American music at Specialty Records.

The Southern Harmonizers:

1. THESE OLD BONES
(SP 300) late 1947 (trad.) P.D. 2:27

2. WHAT ARE THEY DOING IN HEAVEN TODAY?
(SP 301) late 1947 (trad.) P.D. 2:36

The Pilgrim Travelers:

3. THE OLD RUGGED CROSS
(take 1—previously unissued alternate) July 22, 1948
(George Bennard) probably P.D. 2:35
SOLOISTS: **KYLO TURNER, KEITH BARBER**

4. HE WILL REMEMBER ME
(take 1—previously unissued alternate)
late 1947 or early 1948
(E.M. Bartlett) Stamps-Baxter Music-BMI 2:31
SOLOISTS: **TURNER, BARBER**

The Golden Echoes:

5. SINCE I LAID MY BURDEN DOWN (GLORY, GLORY HALLELUJAH)
(SP 331) April 5, 1949
(trad., arr. Kenneth Morris) Martin & Morris-BMI 2:51
SOLOISTS: **PAUL FOSTER, WILMER BROADNAX**

6. WHERE SHALL I BE (WHEN THE FIRST TRUMPET SOUNDS)?
(take 3—previously unissued alternate) April 5, 1949
(Dorothy Love Coates) ATV Music-BMI 2:39
SOLOISTS: **FOSTER, BROADNAX**

The Paramount Singers:

7. HE MEANS SO MUCH TO ME
(previously unissued demo) 1949 (trad.) P.D. 2:34
SOLOIST: **VANCE POWELL**

8. HEAVEN IN MY VIEW
(previously unissued demo) 1949 (trad.) P.D. 2:50
SOLOISTS: **JOSEPH DEAN, POWELL**

The Soul Stirrers:

9. FAITH AND GRACE
(take 1—previously unissued alternate)
July 28, 1950 (I.J. Johnson) P.D. 2:42
SOLOISTS: **JAMES MEDLOCK, R.H. HARRIS**

10. BY AND BY
(take 2—previously unissued alternate)
February 24, 1950
(Charles Tindley, arr. S.R. Crain and R.H. Harris) 4:44
SOLOISTS: **PAUL FOSTER, HARRIS**

The Pilgrim Travelers:

11. JESUS HITS LIKE THE ATOM BOMB
(take 2—previously unissued alternate)
January 30, 1950
(Lee V. McCullom) Edwin H. Morris-ASCAP 2:14
SOLOISTS: **TURNER, BARBER**

12. JESUS, I'M THANKFUL
(take 1—previously unissued alternate)
January 12, 1951
(J.W. Alexander) ATV Music-BMI 2:22
SOLOISTS: **TURNER, BARBER**

The Detroiters:

13. LET JESUS LEAD YOU
(take 5—previously unissued alternate)
August 14, 1951
(arr. William Johnson) ATV-BMI 2:37
SOLOIST: **LEROY BARNES**

14. MOTHER, I NEED YOUR PRAYER
(SP 827) March 1, 1952
(William Johnson) ATV Music-BMI 2:43
SOLOISTS: **BARNES, OLIVER GREEN**

The Soul Stirrers:

15. PEACE IN THE VALLEY
(SP 802) March 1, 1951
(Thomas A. Dorsey) Warner-Tamerlane-BMI 2:39
SOLOISTS: **SAM COOKE, PAUL FOSTER**

16. CHRIST IS ALL
(take 2—previously unissued alternate)
February 27, 1953
(Kenneth Morris) Unichappell-BMI 2:40
SOLOIST: **FOSTER**

The Chosen Gospel Singers:

17. BEFORE THIS TIME ANOTHER YEAR
(SP 838) November 11, 1952
(E.J. Brumfield) ATV-BMI 2:39
SOLOISTS: **E.J. BRUMFIELD, GEORGE BUTLER**

18. LEANING ON THE LORD
(take 1—previously unissued alternate)
November 11, 1952 (writer & publ. unknown) 2:29
SOLOISTS: **BRUMFIELD, FRED SIMS**

The Swan Silvertones:

19. I'M COMING HOME

(take 1—previously unissued alternate)
August 19, 1952 (arr. Claude Jeter) ATV-BMI 3:05

SOLOIST: **CLAUDE JETER**

20. HE WON'T DENY ME

(take 2—previously unissued alternate)
August 19, 1952 (Jeter) ATV-BMI 2:37

SOLOISTS: **PAUL OWENS, SOLOMAN WOMACK**

The Pilgrim Travelers:

21. WEARY TRAVELER

(take 1—previously unissued alternate) July 2, 1953
(Barber-Turner) ATV Music-BMI 2:21

SOLOISTS: **TURNER, BARBER**

22. MY OLD HOME

(take 2—previously unissued alternate)
February 4, 1953
(Kylo Turner) ATV Music-BMI 2:31

SOLOISTS: **TURNER, BARBER**

The Original Five Blind Boys of Alabama:

23. THERE IS A FOUNTAIN

(take 1—previously unissued alternate)
September 28, 1953
(William Cowper, arr. Clarence Fountain) P.D. 3:17

SOLOIST: **CLARENCE FOUNTAIN**

24. MARCHING UP TO ZION

(take 2—previously unissued alternate)
November 19, 1953 (arr. Clarence Fountain) P.D. 2:05

SOLOISTS: **FOUNTAIN, SAMUEL K. LEWIS, GEORGE SCOTT**

The West Coast Jubilees:

25. SINCE JESUS CAME INTO MY HEART (LIVE)

(previously unissued) probably 1954
(McDaniel-Gabriel) probably P.D. 4:10

SOLOISTS: **RICHARD WILIKE RICHARDSON, PRESLEY THOMAS**

26. HE'LL BE THERE (LIVE)

(previously unissued) probably 1954
(Alex Bradford) Unichappell-BMI 7:19

SOLOISTS: **ACE H. FLETCHER, THOMAS**

THE SOUTHERN HARMONIZERS:

UNKNOWN VOCALISTS
WITH **ESSIE HAYDEN**—PIANO

LATE 1947
UNKNOWN LOCATION
A&R: UNKNOWN
"THESE OLD BONES," "WHAT ARE THEY DOING IN HEAVEN TODAY?"

THE PILGRIM TRAVELERS:

KYLO TURNER AND **KEITH BARBER**—LEADS
J.W. ALEXANDER—TENOR
JESSE WHITAKER—BARITONE
RAPHAEL TAYLOR—BASS

LATE 1947 OR EARLY 1948
UNIVERSAL RECORDERS, HOLLYWOOD
A&R: **ART RUPE**
"HE WILL REMEMBER ME"

JULY 22, 1948
UNIVERSAL RECORDERS, HOLLYWOOD
A&R: **ART RUPE**
"THE OLD RUGGED CROSS"

JANUARY 30, 1950
UNIVERSAL RECORDERS, HOLLYWOOD
A&R: **ART RUPE**
"JESUS HITS LIKE THE ATOM BOMB"

JANUARY 12, 1951
UNIVERSAL RECORDERS, HOLLYWOOD
A&R: **ART RUPE**
"JESUS, I'M THANKFUL"

FEBRUARY 4, 1953

UNIVERSAL RECORDERS, HOLLYWOOD
JESSE SAILES—DRUMS
UNKNOWN PIANO, ORGAN
A&R: **ART RUPE**
"MY OLD HOME"

JULY 2, 1953
UNIVERSAL RECORDERS, HOLLYWOOD
UNKNOWN PIANO, ORGAN, BASS, DRUMS
A&R: **ART RUPE**
"WEARY TRAVELER"

THE GOLDEN ECHOES:

WILMER (LITTLE AXE) BROADNAX AND **PAUL FOSTER**—LEADS
ELDRIDGE BOSTIC—TENOR
JIMMY COPELAND—BARITONE
JAMES RICKS—BASS

APRIL 5, 1949
UNIVERSAL RECORDERS, HOLLYWOOD
A&R: **ART RUPE**
"SINCE I LAID MY BURDEN DOWN," (GLORY, GLORY HALLELUJAH)
"WHERE SHALL I BE (WHEN THE FIRST TRUMPET SOUNDS)?"

THE PARAMOUNT SINGERS:

VANCE (TINY) POWELL AND **JOSEPH DEAN**—LEADS
ARCHIE REYNOLDS AND **GENO TERRELL**—TENORS
E. MORRIS KELLY—BARITONE
BEN WILLIAMS—BASS

1949
GENO TERRELL'S LIVING ROOM, SAN FRANCISCO
A&R: UNKNOWN
"HE MEANS SO MUCH TO ME,"
"HEAVEN IN MY VIEW"

THE SOUL STIRRERS:

R.H. HARRIS—LEAD (SELECTIONS #9, 10 ONLY)
PAUL FOSTER—LEAD AND BARITONE
JAMES H. MEDLOCK—LEAD (#9 ONLY)
SAM COOKE—LEAD AND TENOR (#15 AND 16 ONLY)

SENIOR ROY CRAIN—TENOR
R.B. ROBINSON AND **THOMAS L. BRUSTER**—BARITONES
JESSE J. FARLEY—BASS

FEBRUARY 24, 1950
UNIVERSAL RECORDERS, HOLLYWOOD
A&R: **ART RUPE**
"BY AND BY"

JULY 28, 1950
UNIVERSAL RECORDERS, HOLLYWOOD
A&R: **ART RUPE**
"FAITH AND GRACE"

MARCH 1, 1951
UNIVERSAL RECORDERS, HOLLYWOOD
A&R: **ART RUPE**
"PEACE IN THE VALLEY"

FEBRUARY 27, 1953
UNIVERSAL RECORDERS, HOLLYWOOD
UNKNOWN PIANO
(POSSIBLY **FAIDEST WAGONER**),
UNKNOWN ORGAN AND DRUMS
A&R: **J.W. ALEXANDER**
"CHRIST IS ALL"

THE DETROITERS:

OLIVER L. GREEN AND **LEROY BARNES**—LEADS
DEMPSEY HARRISON—TENOR
BILL JOHNSON—BARITONE
ROBERT THOMAS—BASS
WITH **NATHANIEL L. HOWARD**—PIANO

AUGUST 14, 1951
UNITED SOUND SYSTEM, DETROIT
A&R: **ART RUPE**
"LET JESUS LEAD YOU"

MARCH 1, 1952
UNITED SOUND SYSTEM, DETROIT
A&R: **ART RUPE**
"MOTHER, I NEED YOUR PRAYER"

THE CHOSEN GOSPEL SINGERS:

E.J. BRUMFIELD, FRED SIMS,
AND **GEORGE BUTLER**—LEADS
OSCAR COOK—BARITONE
J.B. RANDALL—BASS

NOVEMBER 11, 1952
UNIVERSAL RECORDERS, HOLLYWOOD
A&R: **ART RUPE**
"BEFORE THIS TIME ANOTHER YEAR,"
"LEANING ON THE LORD"

THE SWAN SILVERTONES:

CLAUDE JETER, PAUL OWENS,
AND **ROBERT CRENSHAW**—LEADS
JOHN H. MYLES—BARITONE
HENRY K. BOSSARD—BASS
WITH UNKNOWN DRUMS (#20 ONLY)

AUGUST 19, 1952
UNIVERSAL RECORDERS, HOLLYWOOD
A&R: **ART RUPE**
"I'M COMING HOME," "HE WON'T DENY ME"

THE ORIGINAL FIVE BLIND BOYS OF ALABAMA:

CLARENCE FOUNTAIN
AND **SAMUEL K. LEWIS**—LEADS
GEORGE SCOTT—LEAD AND GUITAR
GEORGE W. WARREN—TENOR
OLICE THOMAS—BARITONE
JOHNNY FIELDS—BASS

SEPTEMBER 28, 1953
BOULEVARD RECORDING STUDIO, CHICAGO
A&R: PROBABLY **ART RUPE**
"THERE IS A FOUNTAIN"

NOVEMBER 19, 1953
UNKNOWN LOCATION
A&R: PROBABLY **ART RUPE**
"MARCHING UP TO ZION"

THE WEST COAST JUBILEES:

PRESLEY THOMAS, RICHARD WILIKE RICHARDSON, AND **ACE H. FLETCHER**—LEADS
A.C. FRANKLIN AND
FREEMAN JINGLES—TENORS
JAMES KNOWLES—BASS

UNKNOWN DATE (POSSIBLY 1954)
ELKS AUDITORIUM, LOS ANGELES
A&R: UNKNOWN
"SINCE JESUS CAME INTO MY HEART,"
"HE'LL BE THERE"

DIGITAL TRANSFERS FROM ANALOG
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MASTERING, 1997—**KIRK FELTON**
(FANTASY STUDIOS, BERKELEY)

SERIES SUPERVISION BY
LEE HILDEBRAND & **OPAL NATIONS**

ART DIRECTION—**JAMIE PUTNAM**
DESIGN—**DEB SIBONY**
COVER PHOTO—**STEVE MARUTA**

SOUTHERN HARMONIZERS 78S COURTESY OF
JIM RIGSBEE AND **MARK CARRODUS.**

SPCD-7069-2

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COMPILED AND PRODUCED FOR REISSUE BY **LEE HILDEBRAND** & **OPAL NATIONS**

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