DISCOGRAPHY

Tracks 1 - 4: FAMOUS WARD SINGERS of PHILADELPHIA:
Gertrude Ward; Clara Ward - First Lead
Willarene 'Willa' Ward-Moultrie, Henrietta Waddy, Marion Williams - Second Lead
David Riddick - Piano
Late August 1949, Los Angeles and Philadelphia, April 1950

Tracks 5 - 24: CLARA WARD SPECIALS or CLARA WARD with THE CLARA WARD SPECIALS:
Clara Ward - Lead
Lil Davis, Frances Steadman, Frances Johnson & Thelma Jackson - Chorus
James Herbert Francis - Organ
some sessions include Raymond Rasberry - Piano
October 1950 to June 1954

JSP Records PO Box 1584 London N3 3NW England

Sleeve Art: aitkendesign@mac.com

Golden GOSPEL GALS

BY OPAL LOUIS NATIONS

In 1935, a young African American woman, Gertrude Ward, along with her two daughters Willa and Clara, launched a gospel singing career that would take them from the Black country churches of South Carolina to the great stadiums, clubs, cruise ships, and concert halls of the world.

Born April 19, 1901 in Anderson, South Carolina, Gertrude 'Mother' Ward and her singers helped shape and influence the careers of such luminaries as Mahalia Jackson, Marion Williams, and Aretha Franklin. Biographer Toni Rose, author of the book 'Hedges and Highways: The Story of the World Famous Ward Singers,' (as dictated by Willa Ward Royster) states that the spiritual beginning of the group started back in 1931 when Gertrude, standing before a washtub, heard the Master's divine calling to go out and sing the message of the scriptures.

Having moved to North Philadelphia in 1932, Gertrude and her family became members of the Mutchmore Memorial Baptist Church where Gertrude helped organize the Eureka Glee Chorus, an aggregation that existed until recent times. The Gertrude Ward Singers were permanently launched in 1934 at the presentation of the group's first anniversary program. Featured guest artists included the Sallie Martin Singers, the late professor Thomas A. Dorsey and Ruth Jones (who would later become widely acclaimed as Dinah Washington.)

The trio's first major touring appearance took place in Buffalo, New York. In 1947, the trio became a quintet with the taking aboard of Henrietta Waddy and the great Marion Williams. In mid-1948, six sessions, stretching from January to August, were recorded for Herman Lubinsky's Savoy label out of New York. The Wards took a trip out to Los Angeles to attend The National Baptist Convention. It was here they were noticed by Leon Rene of Exclusive Records who duly recorded them. Sales seemed promising and some sides were leased to John Dolphin of Dolphins of Hollywood Records who issued a handful of 78 releases in 1949. Somehow the Wards were able to record for Gotham in Philadelphia in April 1950. Two sides showed up, *Surely God Is Able* which became one of their largest selling early records, and *I Need Thee Every Hour*. Somewhere along the line, these two songs were purchased and re-released by Savoy Records which is why they are excluded here.

The difference in label credit names seemed to be enough to allow a breach in contract. The first Gotham session of April 1950 had them billed with the longer soubriquet, the Famous Ward Singers of Philadelphia. The Wards stated that this was to avoid confusion with groups who tried to plagiarize the Ward sound. This bouncing back and forth between Savoy and other labels continued throughout the 1950s. Somehow Gertrude was able to get away with it. For the August 1950 session the quintet was billed as Gertrude Ward and daughters.

In the fall of 1950, Martha Bass temporarily joined the group. However, it seems that a second unit billed as the Clara Ward Specials composed of Lil Davis, Frances Steadman, Frances Johnson and Thelma Jackson were recording for Gotham Records between October 1950 and April 1954. In 1951, having dropped Martha Bass, Gertrude's Ward Singers, variously billed as Clara Ward or the Famous Ward Singers, recorded for Savoy for a year.

DISCOGRAPHY

Track 1: CLARA WARD with THE CLARA WARD SPECIALS:
Clara Ward - Lead
with
Lil Davis, Frances Steadman, Frances Johnson & Thelma Jackson
James Herbert Francis - Organ
or Raymond Rasberry - Piano
June 1954

Tracks 2 - 4: CLARA WARD & THE WARD SISTERS:
Clara Ward - Lead Vocal & Multi-track
with
Frances Steadman, Frances Johnson, Thelma Jackson, Lil Davies
May 1952, Philadelphia

Tracks 5 - 10: CLARA WARD:
Clara Ward - Lead
with
Marion Williams, Kitty Parham, Frances Steadman
Unidentified - Accompaniment
July 17, 1956, unknown location

Tracks 11 - 18: CLARA WARD & THE FAMOUS WARD SINGERS:
Clara Ward - Lead
with
Marion Williams, Frances Steadman, Kitty Parham, Esther Ford
Herman Stevens - Organ
Sam Whinham - Guitar
Milt Hinton - Bass

Osie Johnson - Drums (on second sessions date)
May 1958, unknown location, and June 18, 1958, Town Hall, NY

Tracks 19, 24:
Clara Ward- Vocal
Unidentified - Organ, Male and female vocal groups, harp and rhythm section
February 2, 6 , 13, 1959, unknown locations

Tracks 20 - 23; 25, 26: CLARA WARD SINGERS:
Clara Ward - Lead, Piano, Organ
Gertrude Ward, Jessie Tucker - Second Lead
Dorothy Robinson - Lead
Mildred Means - Vocals
Sam Whinham - Guitar
David 'Panama' Francis - Drums (on some cuts)
September, 1959, Apollo Theatre, NY

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Golden GOSPEL GALS

SELECTED SIDES 1954 -1959

CD: B

The Clara Ward Singers

Golden GOSPEL GALS

BY OPAL LOUIS NATIONS

The Gotham label group, along with the inclusion of Clara, recorded as Clara Ward and the Ward Sisters in 1952 for the BBS label. Also during 1952 there came about an amalgamation of the two groups to form one super-group, again variously billed as the Ward Singers, Famous Ward Singers, Clara Ward or Ward Jubilaires. Long-serving members included Clara, Willa, Gertrude, Henrietta, Marion, and Frances Steadman. This group recorded for Savoy for three years during which time (off and on) Carrie Williams, Ethel Gilbert and Kitty Parham sang on the team.

Toni Rose asserts that "The Ward Singers were the first Afro-American concert performers to break the impenetrable barriers of geography and ethnology." In 1956, Clara along with Marion, Frances and Kitty signed with Don Robey's Houston-based Duke label, with whom the gals cut three singles, one of which, *Redeemed*, became a minor hit across the Southern states. In late 1956, the Ward Singers, now made up of Gertrude, Clara, Willa, Marion, Frances, Kitty and occasionally Henrietta and Esther Ford, were back with Savoy Records once more.

This configuration lasted until the super-group's demise in 1958 (with the exception of sides cut for the Dot label in between). During this time, the Ward Singers were harshly criticized by the older, more conservative members of the Baptist church for their sharp clothes, outrageous wigs and polished dance step routines.

In late 1958, Marion, along with Frances, Kitty, Henrietta and Esther, split away from the Ward Singers and founded the Stars of Faith. The Stars of Faith recorded for Savoy and a host of other labels and are active today on the US and European gospel touring circuit. Starting in 1959, the Clara Ward Singers group cut three albums for Dot and one for Forum Circle but by now there existed three official Ward Singers touring outfits. The Willa Ward Singers, who lasted from 1963 through 1978, Clara and the Famous Ward Singers who were at times composed of former Clara Ward singers, and a West Coast incarnation, the Gertrude Ward Singers, whose leading lights over a thirty year span included Vermettya Royster and Odessa Perkins. Various combinations of the Clara Ward Singers recorded for Savoy, Vanguard, Columbia, Tuba, Verve and on Capitol Records cut a bunch of secular recordings before joining the Nashboro gospel family in the early 1970s.

Clara left this life in 1973 and her mother Gertrude passed away in 1981. The great Marion Williams died in 1994 from complications stemming from a diabetic condition.The amputation of both her legs at the thigh proved too great a shock, a tragic loss coming at a time when her great talent was at last being recognized. In 1959, Willa and her father George founded The Ward's House of Music, a Philadelphia-based gospel sheet music and music bookstore. In 1968, Willa quit the retail business and went on the road as a single. As singer and pianist, Willa drew material from both gospel and secular songbooks and has enjoyed working on the cruise ship Crown Prince Harold. Willa's current health situation is not too promising.

In 1992, the Philadelphia Music Alliance awarded the surviving, almost-original members of the Ward Singers an embedded plaque in the sidewalk on the Avenue of the Arts in Center City. The plaque joins such luminaries as Pearl Bailey, Ethel Waters and Marian Anderson. No doubt about it, the worldly Wards were the most celebrated gospel aggregation of all time.

DISCOGRAPHY

Tracks 1 - 12:
Albertina Walker - Lead
Ora Lee Hopkins - 2nd Lead
with
Elyse Yancey & Nellie Grace Daniels - Vocals
Edward Robinson - Piano
Louise Overall Weaver - Organ
(all former members of Robert Anderson's Gospel Caravans)
April 18, 1952, June 4, 1952, August 25, 1952, May 11, 1953, Chicago

Tracks 13 - 17:
Albertina Walker - Lead
Elyse Yancey, Bessie Griffin - 2nd Lead
with
Iris Humble
Charlotte Nelson - Piano, Organ
(Bessie Griffin was formerly with the Southern Harps / Revivalists of New Orleans)
December 4, 1953, Chicago

Tracks 18 - 24:
Albertina Walker - Lead
Cassietta George - 2nd Lead
with
Iris Humble, Gloria Griffin, Johneron Davis
James Cleveland - Vocal, Piano, Organ
(Cassietta George [Baker] was formerly with The Songbirds of the South. James Cleveland was formerly with The Meditation Singers of Detroit)
October 5, 1954, and January 18, 1955, Chicago

Tracks 25, 26:
Albertina Walker - Lead
Dorothy Norwood - 2nd Lead
with
Imogene Greene, Gloria Griffin & Johneron Davis
James Cleveland - Vocal, Piano, Organ
(Dorothy Norwood and Imogene Greene were both formerly with James Cleveland in The Gospel All Stars and The Davis Sisters)
June 22, 1956, Chicago

Tracks 27, 28:
Albertina Walker- First Lead
Johneron Davis, Dorothy Norwood, Inez Andrews - Lead
James Cleveland - Lead, Piano, Organ
Summer 1956, Chicago

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GOLDEN GOSPEL GALS

BY OPAL LOUIS NATIONS

The legendary Caravans of Chicago have produced more superstar gospel soloists than any other female group or choir. Among the alumni were the great New Orleans diva, Bessie Griffin, who came from the outstanding Southern Harps/Revivalists, Shirley Caesar who with the help of Dorothy Love-Coates came straight out of college to join the group, Inez Andrews who had served briefly in the Raymond Rasberry Singers and the Gospel Harmonettes, Cassietta George who migrated from the Memphis-based Songbirds of the South, Dorothy Norwood who had previously sung in many Atlanta groups and choirs, James Cleveland who had recently come from the Detroit-based Meditations, Imogene Greene who went on to greater prominence with the Davis Sisters, Loleatta Holloway who switched to a soul career in 1973 and enjoyed eight charted hits including 'Cry to meî in 1975, and last but not least, founder Albertina Walker, former soloist at Chicago's West Point Baptist Church.

Albertina Walker was born in Chicago in 1930. In 1947 she joined noted soloist Robert Anderson's female gospel singers called the Gospel Caravan. Anderson also fostered a male group called the Robert Anderson Singers. By 1952, Caravan membership had evolved into Albertina Walker, first lead, second lead Ora Lee Hopkins, Elyse Yancey and Nellie Grace Daniels. Principally, the Gospel Caravan sang in support of Anderson who had made a considerable reputation with the Roberta Martin Singers. A baritone labeled as gospel's Bing Crosby, Anderson possessed a full and pure tone. Somehow Anderson and Walker parted ways. Anderson opted to pursue a solo career without female support and Walker took over full control of the group now renamed the Caravans. Both Anderson and Walker were signed to Leonard Allen's United and States labels on Chicago's 'Record Row.'

Horace Clarence Boyer in his book 'How Sweet the Sound' stated that three songs (all recorded for United), *Think Of His Witness To You*, *Blessed Assurance* and *All Night, All Day*, bear witness to a close, earthy harmony, percussive attacks and a precise rhythm unlike any other female gospel group. This was mostly due to Walker's full-throated lead solos in every case. Walker had a 'honey-coated' vocal style, not dissimilar to her last employer - Robert Anderson, except that Anderson was a baritone and Walker a contralto. This propensity could be likened to soul singer Gladys Knight.

In December 1953, the Caravans took on the great belting Bessie Griffin with whom Walker now shared lead chores. This all ended in October 1954 when Cassietta George replaced Griffin who went on to pursue a solo career and form her own aggregation - the Consolators.

James Cleveland had also signed up at this time to arrange songs for the group. By July 1955, he had assumed most of the solo leads. This lasted into 1957 when Savoy acquired many of the States' gospel masters. It was quite the given formality for the Caravans to sign on with Savoy in 1958. By then, the winning team was in place with Albertina Walker, Delores Washington, Inez Andrews and Shirley Caesar. As Tony Heilbut points out, the Caravans were the most successful group out on the road between 1958 and 1966. Caesar's first glory with the Caravans came in 1962 when she led on *I Won't Be Back*. The record sold in impressive quantities.

The Caravans' sojourn on the States label was undoubtedly Walker's most creative period. She kept the Caravans going in some shape or form up into the 1970s. Today, surviving Caravans occasionally get together for reunions, although most have passed on. The Caravans are remembered today by those who were enthralled by the unique way the group divided their stanzas. For the sake of variety, the Caravans shared stanzas among different soloists. Each stanza was broken up into four sections. For instance, Walker took the first part, Caesar the second, George the third with Walker returning to close it out. The procedure was called 'swing lead,' a device ascribed to male quartets dating back to the 1920s.

Horace Clarence Boyer stated that the Caravans principally embellished by singing melismas on syllables that formerly carried single tones. The soldiers that made up the Caravans were all proficient soloists, equally adept at carrying a song to glory, and beyond.

DISCOGRAPHY

Tracks 1 - 4:
Ruth, Audrey, Thelma and Alfreda Davis - Vocals
Curtis Dublin - Vocal, Piano
May 1949, unknown location

Tracks 5 - 24:
Ruth, Audrey, Thelma and Alfreda Davis, Imogene Greene - Vocals
Curtis Dublin - Vocal, Piano
July 1949 to October 1952, unknown locations

The Davis Sisters are today considered as having been one of the finest and most glorious powerhouse, born-again Pentecostal-driven groups in Post-War gospel history. "They were awesome," says the late J.W. Alexander, tenor and manager of the legendary Pilgrim Travelers who shared the same bill with them at the Apollo Theatre. "They lit up the East Coast," says Brother Joe May's daughter, Annette May (Thomas.)

Gospel luminary Jessy Dixon remembers the Davis Sisters as being so full and rounded in sound that they could have been mistaken for a small choir. "They stood way back from the mike and directed their voices into it," says Dixon and adds that they gave out some of the best singing the world has ever known.

The Davis Sisters, when they were well established, lived on North Warnock Street in the City of Brotherly Love, Philadelphia. Ruth, or 'Baby Sis' as she was affectionately known, was the group's fearsome contralto lead. She stood like a soldier ready to do battle, four square, a mountain of a woman, remembered as 'The Big Maybelle of Gospel Music' and idolized by such current artists as Aretha Franklin and Mavis Staples. Both Aretha and Mavis gained strength from Ruth's courage, for Ruth was afraid of no one. Ruth also possessed an iron-clad religious devotion. "She was the most spiritual singer I have ever heard," said Rebert H. Harris, one-time lead singer of the Soul Stirrers.

Thelma Davis sang soprano and when needed handled the spoken narrative (a necessary component when getting the message of the Bible across). Audrey Davis also sang soprano and Alfreda second contralto. All were inspired by their parents' practice of good, old, down-home, countrified Southern church singing. Almost from the start pianist Curtis Dublin not only played piano but occasionally served as co-lead in the group. Eddie Brown, the husband of Evangelist Rosie Wallace, later functioned as the group's pianist. Anthony Heilbut states that the Davis Sisters were reared in the fiercely Evangelistic Mount Zion Fire Baptized Holiness Church, founded in 1908 by Bishop and Sister W.E. Fuller in Atlanta, Georgia and that the group based most of their repertoire on that denomination's song book.

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Sleeve Art: aitkendesign@mac.com

Ray Funk comments that the sisters sang at revivals for their Evangelist mother. Ruth, who served as a WAC during World War II, was said to have been inspired by Dixie Hummingbirds' lead Ira B Tucker and the great Chicago R&B diva, Dinah Washington.

The Davis Sisters organized themselves into a group in 1945. Ruth was only seventeen, Thelma fifteen, Audrey was barely fourteen, and the young Alfreda was a tot of ten. A year later they made their official debut at their parents' home in Port Deposit, Maryland. With parental blessing, they then followed the Pentecostal circuit, performing in churches and schools in the North-east. Pianist Curtis Dublin joined in 1947. The nineteen-year-old Dublin, an accomplished keyboardist, played in a style that fused church, jazz and blues piano into one.

Philadelphia during the late 1940s and 1950s was a seething hot-bed of incredible gospel talent. The Angelic Gospel Singers, Spiritual Echoes, Mary Johnson Davis, and Famous Ward Singers all came to prominence in Philadelphia at this time. During the 1940s, Clara Ward's mother Gertrude took the fledgling Davis Sisters under her wing, guided them and taught them courage but, best of all, instilled performance skills. In all probability, Gertrude introduced the group to Ivin Ballen of the Ballen Record Company (Gotham Records) during the spring of 1949. Ballen, who set up the Twentieth Century record label just after the War, signed the Davis Sisters to a contract.

Ballen purchased Apex and its parent label, Gotham, from record chain store mogul Sam Goody in January 1948. Goody founded the Gotham label in early 1946 but did not use it to press 'race' records.

Ballen then brought the group to his Gotham studios in Philadelphia. By this time alto singer Imogene Greene had been taken on to add texture to the group's overall sound. Imogene was from Chicago and had been discovered singing in a church choir by the Reverend James Cleveland. Imogene's voice is described by Tony Heilbut as having simultaneously moody, smoky and sometimes seductive colorings. Be that as it may, she certainly added depth and excitement to the group's overall performance. Unfortunately, she never stepped forward to assume lead in the Gotham studios until the summer of 1952 when she headed up *By And By (Part 1)*, a double-sided pewburner which became the group's first hit record.

The Davis Sisters' most revered Gotham release was Gotham 736 issued in April 1953. The top-side bears a cover of Professor Alex Bradford's *Too Close To Heaven* which, unlike the original, was so burdened with worry and anguish it almost seems as if 'Baby Sis' had taken his song straight to glory. The reverse, *Jesus Steps Right In (When I Need Him Most)*, is a gospel penned by Kenneth Morris, given full Pentecostal clout.

Out on the road the Davis Sisters commanded $250 per performance. During the summer months of 1951 the Gay Sisters were enjoying a huge success with a song called *God Will Take Care Of You*. To help promote this, the Gays organized a concert package at the Atlanta Auditorium. The Davis Sisters, who were asked to be a part of the program, tore up the place and stole the show. This phenomenon was witnessed yet again in New York on Sunday, October 10th, 1953 when the Davis Sisters appeared before a full capacity audience on Joe Bostic's Fourth Annual Negro Gospel and Religious Musical Festival (with headliner Mahalia Jackson) at Carnegie Hall, this in spite of a World Series game across the river at Ebbets Field that same afternoon.

By 1954, the small, independent Gotham label could no longer hold the Davis Sisters whose reputation now outstripped any advantageous promotion the label could afford to give them. One could foresee that a move to Savoy Records would become an obvious choice. A broader, more widely covered distribution setup at Savoy ably supported the group for the next glorious, successful fifteen years.

Sadly, every member of the original group has passed on. Thelma died in 1963, accompanist Curtis Dublin, their long-serving pianist, died in 1965, Ruth succumbed to diabetes and passed with a massive, showy funeral in 1970. Audrey died in 1982 and Imogene in 1986. Alfreda passed away in 1989, and Jackie Verdell, Imogene's replacement, was plucked from our midst in recent times. Both Dorothy Love-Coates of the Gospel Harmonettes and Shirley Caesar adopted the tightly choreographed 'Baby Sis' Davis style for which the Davis sisters will always be remembered.