Ring Them Golden Bells

The Best Of The Gospel Songbirds

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The Gospel Songbirds

The Gospel Songbirds, out of Chicago, were blessed with having three notable soloists, all of whom later made their mark on popular music by switching to the more lucrative temptations of the devil's music. The first of these, James Phelps, was born in Shreveport, Louisiana and, as many who dreamed of a better life during the dawn of the Fifties, migrated to Chicago. Hitching up with an early aggregation of The Gospel Songbirds whose members are long forgotten, Phelps recorded the awesomely beautiful "God's creation" for the C.H. Brewer label around 1955.

In 1960, Phelps joined The Clefs of Calvary where he, alongside second lead Calvin April and the group, cut two albums for the Tru-Sound label out of New York. Phelps's vocal delivery paid homage to the sweeping mannerisms of Sam Cooke whose vocal style was copied by many during this time. When Phelps left The Clefs of Calvary to join The Soul Stirrers in 1964 (as Jimmy Outler's replacement), Roscoe Robinson who had quit singing lead with The Five Blind Boys of Mississippi stepped in to take Phelps' place. James Phelps switched to soul music a year later and enjoyed a seven-week run on Billboard's R & B charts with "Love is a five-letter word," a song which peaked at number twelve (Argo 5499.)

This was followed by the touching "Wasting time" and, switching from Argo to Cadet, the Cooke-sounding "Action." Continued success eluded Phelps, and after the disco-like Bobby Miller production of "Don't be a cry baby," his star fell from view.

The second cross-over Gospel Songbirds' lead was Cash McCall, who sang in the group under his birth name of Maurice Dollison. McCall was born in New Madrid, Missouri in January 1941 and, like Phelps, moved to Chicago with his family as a child. After Army discharge, McCall sang in The Five Tones of Harmony, who never recorded. In late 1963, Cash McCall joined The Gospel Songbirds where he sang second lead, played guitar accompaniment, and wrote and arranged material for approximately a year. McCall then became a songwriter and took a job writing songs for George Leaner at One-Derful Records. He later switched to the St. Lawrence label which got gobbled up by Chess.

McCall was part of the buy-out deal. McCall wrote for many major Chess artists. His most successful numbers were recorded by Garland Green, Little Milton, Muddy Waters, and Etta James. In the summer of 1966, McCall wrote and recorded "When you woke up" for the tiny Thomas label distributed by the Chess brothers out of Chicago. Two years later, McCall recorded "S.O.S.," a gospel sermon set to secular music for the Checker label. During 1973, he recorded "Omega man," his first solo album for Stan Lewis's Paula Records. A year later, McCall waxed a cover version of Chick Willis's bawdy smash hit of 1972, "Stoop down mama."

His records sold well but never came close to the lasting satisfaction he has enjoyed over the years composing, producing, and working as a studio musician. In 1967, McCall wrote Otis Clay's first major hit record "That's how it is" put out on George Leaner's One-Derful label. Clay is the third notable Gospel Songbirds soloist.

Otis Clay was born in Warshaw, Mississippi in February 1942 and, like Phelps and McCall, moved to Chicago at a tender age. In 1957, Clay joined a family gospel quartet called The Golden Jubilaires. Besides Clay, The Golden Jubilaires were composed of Howard Scott, Otis Yearby, Odell Carter, J.C. Stanstall, and Charles Bridges who had sung in The Famous Blue Jay Singers. Bridges served as lead tenor and manager of The Famous Blue Jays throughout the Forties and into the early Fifties.

In 1960, Bridges reconstructed The Famous Blue Jay Singers by drawing from members of The Golden Jubilaires. Clay toured with The Famous Blue Jays, then joined The Holy Wonders out of Newark, New Jersey who were originally from Chicago, back in the late Forties. The Holy Wonders, who at that time recorded for Bobby Robinson's Revelation label, were composed of Abraham Mack, Jerry Erby, Leon Williams, and Alonzo Price. In 1961, Clay joined forces with The Pilgrim Harmonizers who, after Clay's departure, recorded for Don Robey's Song Bird label out of Houston, Texas.

During his tenure with The Pilgrim Harmonizers, Clay was able to cross over into the secular realm to record four solo sides for Carl Davis at Columbia Records. Nothing was released, and Clay kept the recordings a secret for fear of offending his gospel music colleagues.

Otis Clay joined The Gospel Songbirds in late 1963. Clay and McCall sang lead on The Gospel Songbirds' third Nashboro session of April 1964 at which time six songs were committed to tape. In late 1964, Arthur Crume, tenor singer with The Soul Stirrers on Chess, was on loan, serving both as second baritone and bass guitarist for The Sensational Nightingales who were rehearsing songs for their first album release (without The Rev. Julius Cheeks), entitled "Travel On."

Otis Clay, an old friend of Crume's, was introduced to The Sensational Nightingales who brought Clay in on their album rehearsals. Although Clay stayed in the group for almost a year, he did not commit to signing a contract with them but preferred instead to sign with George Leaner, president of One-Derful Records. Consequently, Clay never recorded with The Sensational Nightingales who were at that time under contract with Don Robey's Peacock label out of Houston.

During Clay's stay with The Sensational Nightingales he toured with them extensively down the East Coast and across to the Pacific. Clay quickly realized that the life of a touring gospel troubadour was hard and often meant living below the poverty line. However, although Clay began to record soul records for Leaner, his heart remained over in gospel, and throughout the ensuing years he has managed to surround himself with gospel artists and those willing to record him in a gospel setting.

After seven exceptional singles releases (including two that entered the charts), and the demise of One-Derful Records in 1968, Clay's contract was sold to Cotillion, an Atlantic Records subsidiary for the grand sum of five thousand dollars. After four years and only one chart entry, Clay tried his fortunes in the South with Hi Records of Memphis. Clay recorded an armful of magnificent soul ballads and jump tunes under the tutelage of Willie Mitchell. However, only two sold in significant quantities. In 1975, Clay founded his own label, Elka Records and has

since waxed for Kayvette, Elka, Jewel, P-Vine, Bullseye, and Blind Pig.

In 1985, Clay made his first impressive return to gospel with the release of "When the gates swing open," issued on a twelve inch 45. Other songs followed and were collectively released on CD. All were recorded for Stan Lewis in Shreveport. Blind Pig followed and put out the excellent "Gospel Truth" album in 1993. Although immensely popular throughout the world, especially in Japan, for his deep soul material, Clay tells me he is very excited about a gospel album collection he is currently producing.

The Gospel Songbirds joined the Nashboro family some time during the summer of 1962. Members included Matthew Haynes, first lead, Rev. John Dowdy, second lead, Joseph Moore, lead, Sylvester Hudson and A.J. Durr. The group's first session, held on the 27th of August 1962, resulted in the completion of seven songs plus an alternate of "Jesus, I love you."

This collection opens with a rollicking swing through the infectious "The Bible is right" on which the high-flying Haynes hums and wails as Dowdy pitches out his lesson from the Bible. Haynes warbles sweetly as again Dowdy pitches his sermon on "Jesus, I love you" in its previously released form. Lovely harmonic textures abound in the upper register. Haynes and Dowdy were perfect opposites like the Rev. Claude Jeter and Rev. Robert Crenshaw in The Swan Silvertones. Haynes and Dowdy were fire and water.

Haynes weaves a pretty tapestry around "When they ring those golden bells," toughened in places by Dowdy's raspy intrusions. More high tenor harmonies support the soul-singing Haynes on a righteous reading of "When God calls me," garnered on guitar with delicious tremolo gestures. "Traveling pilgrim" is realized in traditional form with Haynes and Dowdy sharing the excitement.

The same line-up reported for duty at the group's second Nashboro session in December 1962. Four songs were committed to tape, three of which saw light of day at the time. We have chosen to include "Glory, glory hallelujah" from the two songs left in the can. The song is given a chunky rhythm and blues feel that fits quite pleasantly. Dowdy convincingly pours on the heat and works up a sweat as the group methodically plows along.

In April 1963, The Chicago Defender reported that The Gospel Songbirds had made an appearance on Syd Ordower's Jubilee Showcase, a Chicago gospel t.v. program. The caption under the group photo listed the members as being Joseph Moore, lead, Sylvester Hudson, William Durr, Larc McCullum, Bobby McConico, Rev. John Dowdy, and A.J. Durr.

By April 1964, the date of the group's third Nashboro session, William Durr, Larc McCullum, and Bobby McConico were gone, Matthew Haynes had rejoined, and to add strength and vigor, Otis Clay and Maurice Dollison a.k.a. Cash McCall were recruited. McCall doubled as guitar accompanist. "Let Jesus lead you" is the only previously issued song of the three we have chosen from the April 1964 session, a taping which netted six compositions. Most of the tunes convey a distinctly stronger sanctified approach than those that went before.

Otis Clay testifies as only he knows how on "Let Jesus lead you," supported on both flanks by solid background singing. Clay pulls out all the stops on "If I could hear my mother." Dramatic screaming and hollering push the tune to visceral limits. The Gospel Songbirds' cover of the old Sinatra standard "I believe" comes on the heels of The Blind Boys of Alabama's impressive version recorded only months before for Herman Labinsky's Gospel label. Unlike The Blind Boys' reading, The Gospel Songbirds' arrangement crosses over into secular quartet, more in line, say, with the way The Vibranaires or Harptones might have shaped it.

By April 1965, the month of the fourth Nashboro session, with Clay and McCall gone, the group had more or less reverted back to its 1962 lineup with Haynes and Dowdy back on lead mikes. The previously unissued "Swing low, sweet chariot," our only selection from this date, shows us how steadfast the guys kept to a sweetly soulful yet sometimes hard-edged formula in line with trends kept alive by gospel outfits from the Mid-West, so neatly paralleled over in secular quartet by groups like The Impressions and Artistics.

The Gospel Songbirds' ornamental reading of the Work brothers' arrangement of "Swing low, sweet chariot" presents enough subtle variation to hold our interest. "Canaan land," the first of f our from the June 1966 session, is given tight, joyous, and thorough exuberance. Haynes pitches personal testimony on "Story of the woman (at the well)," a number which might have evoked stronger feelings had it been allowed a little extra time. My personal favorite is the previously unreleased "I love the name Jesus." Haynes' long, drawn out, soft, mellow phrases catch fire near the close when the second lead singer kicks in. Again, the song sadly lacks time to take off.

Strong conviction is given a tight delivery of "Beulah land," pitched with might and laid in a solid groove.

This collection represents less than half of The Gospel Songbirds' total Nashboro output. We were hard pressed to pick the best from out of so much worthy material. The Gospel Songbirds were one of Chicago's finest traditional post-war gospel quartets whose finest hours came about during an era of political and social unrest.

— Opal L. Nations – June 1995

Executive Producer
Patti Drosins and Rob Santos

Reissue produced by
Robert Y. Kim and Opal Louis Nations

Compiled by
Opal Louis Nations

Art Direction/Design by
Mitchell Kanner

Liner notes by
Opal Louis Nations

Mastered by
Walter DeVenne

Original photo courtesy of
Robert Pruter

Project Assistant
Michael Russell

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