Gospel Treasures Records OLN 2001

Narcisse singing with arms outspread like wings (Courtesy Dick Bass)

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In Robert Tallent's excellent history, "Voodoo in New Orleans" (Collier Books, 1946), he discusses at length the Queen of the Voodoos, Marie Laveau. The legendary Laveau the elder was born in New Orleans at the turn of the nineteenth century. Accounts tell of her good nature. Wonderful stories were told of Laveau's exploits at the sick bed. As a nurse, Laveau took care of those smitten with cholera and yellow fever. She was pious and took delight in strengthening the allegiance of souls to the church. Yet Laveau

(Picture courtesy Mrs. Russell, Las Vegas)

met with prejudice and loathing. Rumors circulated that she had danced with snakes, drunk the warm blood of sacrifice and had crept through the streets in the dead of night to leave coffins and conjure balls on the doorsteps of her enemies.

The same kind of Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde attributes are bestowed upon the late Louis H. Narcisse, singer, preacher, soothsayer and founder (just after World War II) of the Mount Zion Spiritual Temple, Inc., headquartered both in Detroit and in Oakland, California. Gerald L. Davis, author of "I got the word in me and I can sing it, you know – A study of the performed African-American sermon" (University of Penn. Press, 1985), succinctly describes Narcisse as a man deeply impressed by the organization of the British monarchy and was attended by a retinue of princesses, princes, ladies (in waiting) and Queen mothers. Periodically he anointed them into a privileged circle in a ceremony resembling "knighting" rituals. Narcisse was a monarch who thought of himself as being able to grant the wishes of his flock, for a fee ranging from as much as five hundred dollars and descending to one dollar for those of severely limited means. With a cover charge plus the rubbing of oil to the back of the hand a parishioner might find him- or herself physically or spiritually improved.

Some say Narcisse did work miracles and did spread the creed of godliness in his parish. Others saw him as a devil, con artist and clever snake-oil salesman who, according to Bill Snyder in his October 1991 Oakland Tribune article entitled "Affairs of State – King's flock at war over estate" was a man who bled his parishioners dry. That he had a darker, exploitative side. That his closest friends were only those able to bankroll his flamboyant, extravagant lifestyle.

To start from the beginning, King Louis H. Narcisse was born in Gretna, Louisiana, across the Mississippi River from New Orleans, on April 27, 1921.

The King was one of three children. The family, of Creole origin, lived dirt-poor. The young Narcisse was interested in both music and religion and never passed up an opportunity to tinker around on an old piano, if one offered itself. When his father died Narcisse moved to New Orleans where he steeped himself in Roman Catholicism and the cult of voodooism. Legendary gospel diva Bessie Griffin, whose mother died shortly after Bessie was born, was raised by one of her family's Creole cousins, Lucy Narcisse. Lucy, a strong singer, was a relative of King Narcisse who often led the congregation of her local Baptist church to spiritually exalted heights at Sunday services.

(Researchers have been trying for a long time to establish a link between Blues Music and the music of Africa, but not very convincingly. It's much easier to see this connection in Gospel Music. Starting with African religions and drum-ceremonies evoking extasy and spirit possess-sions. And the evolution via the slave trade, in Haiti and New Orleans, where it came in contact with the Catholic Church and its ceremonies and The Holy Spirit. Then finally becoming the Gospel Music we for instance can hear on this record).

Narcisse moved to Vallejo, California in the late 1930s. During World War II he worked as a rigger at the Naval shipyard on Mare Island. According to his half-brother, Earl Batiste, Narcisse opened his first West Oakland Storefront Church in 1945 with only fifty folding chairs. Here, Narcisse sang, preached and accompanied himself on piano. In 1941, James Wiltz, an old Louisiana friend of Narcisse, formed a gospel quartet called the Rising Stars. The first three initial Rising Star recruits were from Louisiana. Narcisse was one of these. The King sang baritone in the Rising Stars for awhile. This was before the group made their recording debut on Bob Geddins' Oakland-based Big Town label and the same year Narcisse founded his ministry. The Rising Stars went on to become one of the Bay Area's most beloved and successful quartets, fronting

such prominent singers as Paul Foster Sr. who went on to sing in the famous Soul Stirrers and the legendary Tommy Jenkins who sang like a hummingbird and died on the streets in obscurity.

Reverend Hubert L. Garnett, current pastor of The New Hope Baptist Church on Third Street in Oakland has this to say about Narcisse. "My father, Burton Young Garnett Jnr., was one of King Narcisse's chief ranking disciples. As I was told, The King started his feeding program for the poor around 1953. He'd pass out blessed bread every Monday morning between ten and eleven from the steps of his front porch of his home at 886 - 31st Street and Market in Oakland. When the King prayed on and helped people, they'd shower him with gifts. The King adored beautiful and costly worldly goods and exotic flowers and perfumes. In 1958 a woman, upon whom The King had prayed, bought him a custom-made gilded Cadillac Seville, one of only three ever built. A second was owned by Queen Elizabeth of England. He was also given a Rolls Royce and a Bentley."

Garnett continues, "The King was a self-styled spiritualist who did not hold to one religious denomination. He built his faith on precepts borrowed from the Catholic, Methodist, Pentecostal and Baptist churches. The people he helped often lived for awhile at his palace on Calmar Avenue. The King was the first African American to have his spiritualist ministry recognized by the church community. I was the first child born at The Mount Zion Spiritual Temple Church at Fourteenth and Peralta in West Oakland. The King founded branch ministries in Richmond, Pittsburg, Vallejo, Bakersfield, Sacramento, New Orleans and in Houston, Texas. He also founded the Mount Zion Saint Peter's Chapel on Joy Street in Detroit and ensconced himself in a forty-room palace close by. My mother, Leatrice Garnett, played piano for the King for seventeen years. The King had an extremely talented secretary, Lavenia Portlock. Miss Portlock could sing exceptionally well. They called her "the girl with the golden voice. "The King was crowned by bishops from The Church of God in Christ at an Oakland ceremony in 1960."

From a sexual standpoint, The King was thought to be gay, a preference which did not seem to bother anyone, black or white. Narcisse's church "court" was composed of princesses dressed in regal white robes, bishops in full regalia, princes and missionaries decked out in black tuxedos, Reverend Mothers, a Queen and Mothers Superiors. All paid dues to retain their titles and few challenged this during the early, more lucrative years of The King's reign. A retinue of politicians (including many Republicans) and well known gospel singers and performers attended The King's services and radio programs. This list included the entire Hawkins Family, Helen J.H. Stephens who often played piano on the broadcasts and who went on to direct and record with Berkeley's Voices of Christ Choir, and Theola Kilgore who, having crossed over into secular music, did well for herself in 1963. Kilgore also recorded gospel with Narcisse at Oakland's Spiritual Temple in the mid- to late 1950s (more on this later).

Over the years Narcisse befriended people of power and world-wide reputation. These included Mahalia Jackson who guested at his mansion, Little Richard Penniman, plus a string of former California politicians from governor on down. In the early 1960s Chris Strachwitz in league with a young German documentary film maker filmed Narcisse at his Oakland Temple. The footage begins when The King's Cadillac Seville draws up to the church and the chauffeur, having rolled out a runner of red carpet which led from the car door to the portals of the temple, opens a rear door for The King to step out. The King, dressed resplendently in full sparkling bishop's regalia, slowly ascends the steps to the temple as would a reigning monarch followed by senior members of his retinue: males in smart dark suits and females in long, white, flowing robes and head-clothes in the style of the Holy Land. The King, whose fingers are laden with golden rings set with expensive gemstones, nervously shuffles the candles and low wattage table lamps on a cluttered altar cloth. No other means of lighting illuminates the inner sanctum. Dark, shadowy figures start to sing, as the piano, which had commenced playing as The King's limousine drew up to the curb, plays softly and soulfully.

With ease and effortless grace The King starts to sing. His soft, sweet and soulful refrains cool the congregation and a few enter a sublime state of ecstasy. There is no doubt that The King's pretty mellismas and clever, soft vibratos win many a sin-sick pilgrim. It was no wonder that women laid bare their souls and offered all their worldly goods to him. When the elders of the church are in their respective seats, The King starts into his sermon. Gerald L. Davis describes The King's oratory approach this way: "When Narcisse steps up to the pulpit, he does not, as others, reaffirm his patronage. He does not develop his sermon in the general way and does not place himself in a mediating position between God and his flock. He has borrowed his philosophical stance from the Quakers. He uses Hail Marys in conjunc-

tion with The Lord's Prayer which he chants antiphonally during the course of his sermon, and along the way reaffirms his own sensibilities to mark certain issues. The King puts his sermon in a workaday context by relating his text to the qualities of lived experiences inherent in the average African American, a context which spread later on amongst some of The King's contemporaries. Evening services often lasted until two in the morning."

Parallels can be drawn with the work of African-Cape Verdean immigrant Marcelino Manoel de Graca, otherwise known as "Daddy Grace." Grace, an ex-railroad cook for the Southern Railway, borrowed from the Holiness, Revival and other Pentecostal elements to build his own House of Prayer, an all-people's ministry in New England. Whereas The King wore fancy robes and fingers full of rings, Grace sported a Dali-like mustache, grew long, curly fingernails and shoulder-length wavy black hair. Like The King, Grace was criticized for leading a cult. Like The King, Grace created hierarchical ranks and bestowed titles. Like The King, Grace was attended by young women in white who followed in his shadow. He too designed uniforms for his senior staff. Like The King, Daddy Grace developed a powerful, charismatic and flamboyant personality. Both were often at odds with The Law. Both proclaimed the value of healing power through products endorsed by the church, and each encouraged mixed congregations. Unlike Daddy Grace, who raised himself up over a lengthy period of time to Bishop, Narcisse, as stated by Alan Young in his book, "Woke me up this morning" (University of Mississippi Press, 1996), rose to Minister in 1950, up to Bishop in 1953, to King in 1960 and then, to crown his personal glory, to His Grace King Louis H. Narcisse in 1962.

In 1949 The King began making recordings. The first of these was cut by a Mr. Jaxyson (pronounced Jackson). Mr. Jaxyson ran a radio repair shop in Oakland at 711 Seventh Street. The back of the repair shop was given over to making recordings of local talent beginning in 1948. To Jaxyson, most of his tapes and acetates constituted experiments in recording, not worthy of finding a place in the commercial marketplace. A small fraction of Jaxyson's work found its way into a few Bay Area retail record outlets. Jaxyson also recorded blues, notably Johnny Fuller. On the spiritual side, Jaxyson cut metal discs and acetates on the Rainbow Gospel Singers, Gospel Trumpets, New Bethel Echoes, Rev. Louis H. Narcisse and other worthwhile songsters.

Jaxyson put out only one and a half record on The King, supported by piano

Theola Kilgore – Narcisse's soloist (Photo courtesy Opal Louis Nations)

and organ. **Down On My Knees**, a keyboard-driven testimony given out with much gusto coupled with a strident, sometimes bellowing, reading of **My Eternal Home** came first. The King's voice here is strong and powerful, to say the least, but lacking the soft touches that marked his recorded work later on. Narcisse was certainly one of the finest baritones in the Bay Area at the time.

The King's second Jaxyson release turned up on the back of a "Susan Bennett" recording (spelling of her name is uncertain). This was **I'm Going To Tell God**, a mournful, soul-felt plea given a labored rendering. The King cut a series of test pressings for Jaxyson at this time. Among those ending up in the hands of Chris Strachwitz of Arhoolie Records are "What Could I Do," and **Get Back Jordan**, a jolly toe-tapping tune that sounds as if recorded live and in service. The King sings like a saved and sanctified blues singer. Many of Mr. Jaxyson's test pressings ended up on a garbage dump in Martinez where fortunately they were rescued by collector Richard Bass of Sacramento.

In 1951, The King recorded for Ollie Hunt's tiny Olliet label in San Francisco. Olliet was a one-man operation. Hunt would haul around a portable metal master-making machine, record artists in their own homes and later sell his pressed product on the streets from the trunk of his car. The King and his group, the Celestial Tones, recorded for Hunt "Why Should I Worry," backed with "He Will Know Me." When Hunt pulled up stakes in San Francisco and headed down to Culver City to work for the Bihari brothers at Modern Records, he took most of his masters with him. Some, including the aforementioned two titles, were leased to Modern who later reissued them.

The next time The King was caught on wax was at John Dolphin's Hollywood Records on West Pico Boulevard in Hollywood in 1953. Again, only one release ever hit the streets, **He That Believeth**, a Rhumba-tempoed tune given a brisk run-through, and **My Mind Is Standing On Jesus**, a rousing, roof-rising bouncer which finds The King at the limit of his amazing ability. It is quite likely that Dolphin had made a deal with Hunt (and even perhaps the Bihari brothers) to acquire the above-mentioned two titles as it is unlikely that The King ever waxed in Southern California.

In 1955 the King was recorded at his temple with the Mount Zion Spiritual Choir. In fact, most of the sides that post-date the 1953 releases were recorded live with remote recording equipment. This time, The King waxed for yet another tiny Bay Area label, Ajax. Ajax was owned and operated by a man remembered as "Chick." Chick, who wrote and arranged songs and played guitar and piano, rented studios in Oakland, off Broadway. Chick also recorded the legendary Golden West Singers of Richmond with whom the teenaged Joe Simon spent almost a year. Chick issued the Narcisse single as his first release, his original version of **Give Me Wings Lord**, otherwise known as "Two Wings," a song given strong, devil-defying treatment both by traveling evangelist Reverend Utah Smith on Regis in 1944 and Chicago's Reverend Robert Ballinger on Peacock Records in 1965. The King's version really rocks the church and is one of his best-remembered recordings.

The reverse featured Theola Kilgord, otherwise known as Theola Kilgore. Kilgore, born in Shreveport and raised in Oakland, sang gospel from age seven at The King's Temple until she was discovered by Ed Townsend of "For Your Love" fame. Townsend ran his own production and publishing company plus the Serock label on which imprint Kilgore enjoyed a number three R & B hit in 1963 called "The Love Of My Man."

For Chick Kilgore recorded **Look To The Hills**, a mid-tempo chant belted with sparse piano and heavy choral and rhythmic accompaniment. Just how well

King Narcisse 1964 (Photo by Chris Strachwitz)

the record sold is difficult to tell. Chances are both sides would have garnered heavy airplay on Paul Reid's gospel programs over Berkeley's KRE.

(Yet another Ajax record was released by The King: "Everything Belongs To God/ Get Away Jordan", Ajax 107).

The King's maxim was ***It's So Nice To Be Nice***. In the mid-Fifties he put words and music to his motto and recorded **It's So Nice To Be Nice** for the minuscule Concert of Stars label about which little is known. One side bore the vocal ballad version with The King stretching and pitch-bending the notes every which way while the reverse featured an instrumental rendering of the same song accompanied by piano and organ. My sense is that the

Concert of Stars label was financed by The Spiritual Temple or members thereof.

Somewhere about this time The King cut his fabulously moving version of **Silent Night** Parts 1 and 2. There has never been a more outstanding rendition of German-born composers' – Joseph Mohr (lyrics) and Franz Gruber (melody) – 1818 Christmas song.

On Part 1 The King whispers the nativity scene from the Bible with such feeling it sends chills down your spine. Part 2, a standard vocal reading of the song supported by the Mount Zion Spiritual Choir, is too gorgeously beautiful to describe. Waxed for the tiny Smith-Som label, again in all probability a limited quantity, vanity pressing, copies are extremely difficult to find, even on the collectors' market.

In 1959 The King set up a one-session deal with Ray Dobard of Music City Records on Alcatraz Avenue in Berkeley. What transpired was the release of "Nobody But You" backed with "I Want Jesus To Walk With Me." Meanwhile, The King was fortunate enough to have been able to cut a deal with Robert Geddins Snr. whereby an album's worth of material was cut for release on Ron Badger and Robert Geddins' own Veltone label during services at The Mount Zion Spiritual Temple with the Wings of Faith Choir.

In addition to remakes of "Give Me Wings Lord" (retitled **Give Me Two Wings**) and **It's (So) Nice To Be Nice**, the album featured eight of The King's most requested songs customarily played on "Moments of Meditation," the weekly radio Temple-cast program aired over KDIA in Oakland to a listening audience purported to top one and a half million. To organ, piano and guitar accompaniment The King sang "a worried" interpretation of **Move Up a Little Higher**, an equally anguished **I Have a Friend**, a boogiefied **No Changes In Jesus**, a glorious, high-spirited **Pass Me Not, O Gentle Savior**, a clever, mellismatic version of **Leaning On Jesus**, a pipe-stretching, personalized reading of **Somebody Cares**, a rafter-splitting choral demolition of **Walk in Jerusalem**, plus a church-heating, double-strength wailing of **Following Jesus**, one of three self-penned compositions gathered here. Sales of the album looked promising. The King had a "mail order phone line" and encouraged far-away fans of his ministry to purchase copies of his work by mail. The album was quickly leased to Lewis R. Chudd of Imperial Records on Hollywood Boulevard in Hollywood who reissued it alongside the Soul Stirrers and Traveling Four in his 9200 album series.

It seems The King still had ties with Ron Badger who lifted the immensely popular, probably remixed **Give Me Two Wings** from the album and along with "I'm On The Battlefield" put both songs out as a 45 on his own Shirley label. The King had reached an apex of popularity at this point, and the enthusiasm he put into his recordings seemed to reflect this. On the heels of his Shirley release, which generated some sales action in California and in the southern states, The King cut one single for Don Robey's Peacock label in Houston. The release conveyed a real departure from the norm. Gone were the church setting, the rippling piano and mass choir, and in their place Robey used the standard studio rhythm section plus a female backing group. The only honest-to-goodness, down-home church quality here came from The King's rich and powerful vibrato sound, easily recognizable by its booming vigor and fullness of tone.

The Peacock release pitched **Jesus I Can't Forget You**, a roof-lifting stomper with **Without The Lord**, a slow, tear-stained arrangement adapted for even greater effect by Brother Prince Dixon two years later. Dixon took the melody, added a few dramatic sweeps and recorded it under the title "In The Arms of The Lord."

In 1964 Ray Dobard issued a second King single, probably pulled from material he had recorded in 1959. Back in the tried and true format of "live church" with a full choir, The King waxed Geoff Love's 1958 popular adaptation of the traditional spiritual "He's Got The Whole World In His Hands" (Parts 1 and 2). The recording must have been made a short while after Laurie London's no. 3 single-sided hit version on Capitol Records. For some reason, Ray Dobard chose not to issue it in 1959 to cash in on the song's then current popularity. The King's version is irresistibly infectious with its fine, joyful singing and foot stomping rhythm and would have caught on nation-wide had Dobard had the wherewithal to make the right connections.

Did The King record after this? It is difficult to tell. He cut so many songs for fly-by-night labels it would be virtually impossible to come up with a complete discography.

During the 1970s The King's popularity entered into a state of decline. Gradually, his real estate holdings were sold off to pay back taxes. When he died in Detroit from a heart attack on February 3, 1989, he left a lot of financial loose ends. He was accused of fraud and is said to have doctored his finances by constantly shifting his money around. He had played ping-pong with his own trust and the church's bank account.

After his death, The King's body was flown from Detroit to Oakland, where a three-and-a-half hour service, conducted by Reverend A.L. Cobbs, was held at The

King Narcisse 1964 with the Wings of Faith Choir at the Mount Zion Spiritual Temple, Oakland (Photo by Chris Strachwitz)

Mount Zion Spiritual Temple. His open coffin was surrounded by the customary church candles. Choirs sang, saxophones wailed, a legion of pianists played Good News shuffles, preachers far and wide paid homage. Decked in a floor-length, fur-trimmed red brocade cape, white satin robes, pearl-encrusted miter and gold-mesh cowboy boots, The King looked resplendent. His gold sword and gold-handled cane were laid by his side. Fifteen hundred mourners turned out.

The King's bronze casket was placed inside an antique hearse, and four black horses driven by John Jenkel dressed in black tails and top hat led the procession towards downtown Oakland. The entourage turned onto San Pablo Avenue and drove seventeen miles to Rolling Hills Memorial Park where The King was placed in the ground.

Most of The King's recordings are out of print, which is undeserved. The man not only possessed unusual spiritual qualities but was blessed with a mighty voice which seemed to emanate without much physical effort.

Opal Louis Nations 2003

(With invaluable help from
Ruth Black Castille, Chris Strachwitz,
Woody Chauncy, Lee Hildebrand,
and Reverend Hubert L. Garnett)

This is the Obituary that was given to mourners at his funeral service.

– "His Grace King" Dr. Louis H. Narcisse, son of the late Mr. and Mrs. Jesse Narcisse (nee Stella Kelly); was born on April 27, 1921 in New Orleans, Louisiana.

He departed this life on Friday, February 3, 1989 in Detroit, Michigan.

As a young lad he sang, prophesied and prayed and was a mystery to his family. He was baptised in 1932 and became a member of Mt. Zion Baptist Church, whose pastor was the Reverend W.R.C. Borden. He received his education in Louisiana.

In 1939 a voice spoke to him and said, "Go to California". He came to California in 1943 *(the correct date is the late '30s)*.

In 1945 he founded the Mt. Zion Spiritual Temples Organization. The State of California, incorporated the organization as a bonafide religious movement. It was also documented in Washington, D.C. This spiritual movement spread and many other Temples were setup during his life time. He was an inspiration to many, many people and certainly a worthy example for all. –

(Courtesy Mrs. Russell, Las Vegas)