THE
CHRISTIAN TRAVELERS
offer a stirring release
"WELL DONE"
b/w
"MAKE MORE ROOM FOR JESUS"
These Spiritual sides are destined to be hits!!!
PEACOCK # 1715
PEACOCK
RECORDS
4104 Lyons
Houston, Texas

The Christland Singers
"AM I TOO CLOSE"
"SOMEDAY, SOMEWHERE"

SUNSET
TRAVELERS
Present Two Great Spiritual Sides
"YES, YES, I'VE DONE
MY DUTY"
b/w
"MY NUMBER WILL BE CHANGED"
DUKE # 201
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TEXAS GOSPEL
BE WHAT YOU ARE

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CHRISTLAND SINGERS
Robert H.Harris, James Johnson (tenors); Rev. Leroy Taylor, Thomas L. Bruster (baritones); George Croffet (bass) with unk drums. Houston August 1953
1. AM I TOO CLOSE 1720 (Harris) 2. SOMEDAY, SOMEWHERE 1720 (Dorsey)
3. KEEP ME PART I 1720 (Harris) 4. KEEP ME PART 2 1729 (Harris)

SOUTHERN TONES
Bob King, Leon Bingham, Rev. W.L. Richardson, Johnny Noble, Franklin Pouncy, Mac?? (Vocals) with Bob King (guitar); unk drums. Jan 1954
5. IT MUST BE JESUS DUKE 205 (King) 6. THE DYING SINNER DUKE 205 (King) 7. BE WHAT YOU ARE DUKE 207 (King) 8. JUST A CLOSER WALK WITH THEE DUKE 207 (King) 9. I'M GOING ON IN HIS NAME DUKE 208 (Pouncey) 10. MY MIND ON JESUS DUKE 208 (Noble – Richardson)

SUNSET TRAVELLERS
Sammy Lee Dortch, Sylvester Ward, (tenors); McKinney Jones, Rev. Lumpkin, Grover Blake (baritones); Robert Lewis (bass); Mckinney Jones (guitar); John Duke (drums). Houston January 20th 1953
11. MY NUMBER WILL BE CHANGED DUKE 201 (Robey-Ward) 12. YES YES I'VE DONE MY DUTY DUKE 201 (Robey-Ward)

MID SOUTH SINGERS
Major Douglas, Robert Crutcher (lead vocals); Charles King (tenor); Delton Hudson (baritone); Elester Sawyer (bass); Charles Bradley (vocal); unk drums. April 1953
13. LORD COME ON AND SEE ABOUT ME DUKE 202 14. WILL MEET YOU IN THE MORNING DUKE 202 (Lattimore)

HEAVEN BOUND FOUR
John H. Robbins (lead vocal); W.C.Bore, John Robinson, Fortune Stevenson, Jesse King, Clarence Hopkins (vocals); with unk drums. c. May 1953
15. I'M GIVING UP THIS WORLD DUKE 203 16. THERE'S A HAND GONE BEFORE DUKE 203

SUNSET TRAVELERS
Samy Lee Dortch, Sylvester Ward,(tenors); McKinney Jones, Rev. Lumpkin, Grover Blake (baritones); Robert Lewis (bass); McKinney Jones (guitar); John Duke (drums). Houston January 20th 1953
17. I'M BUILDING A HOME DUKE 204 18. WISH I WAS IN HEAVEN SITTING DOWN DUKE 204

SOUTHERN WONDERS
Rev. Ernest McKinney, Henry Jack Franklin (tenors); R.L.Weaver, Sammy Lee Dortch, James Darling (baritones); Artis Yancey (bass); Louis Blair (guitar) plus unk drums. Houston June 1952
19. HOW MUCH MORE CAN I BEAR 1725 20. I'LL FLY AWAY 1725 (Lattimore)

CHRISTIAN TRAVELERS
J.D.Mitchell, W. Thomas (vocals) others unknown. June 1953
21. MAKE MORE ROOM FOR JESUS IN YOUR LIFE 1715 (Thomas)
22. WELL DONE 1715 (Thomas)

As above October 1954
23. OH WHAT A SAVIOUR 1737 (Thomas) 24. ONLY A PILGRIM 1737 (Tyler)

The Duke/Peacock indie discery became one of a handful of vital outfits for blues and gospel during the 1950s and 1960s. Don Deadric Robey, the company's de-capo, engineered his labels into a major force in the U.S. record industry and even influenced trends in sound for both musics. Born November 1st, 1903 in Houston's Fifth Ward, Robey quit school early to take up the life of a gambler. After marriage in 1922, Robey turned to a more responsible vocation-travelling sales rep for a liquor distributor.

Some time during the 1930s he found partners and set up a taxicab business in Houston. After they installed radios, it turned a sizeable profit. He worked with music promoter Morris Merritt to bring talent to Houston. He began promoting ballroom dances and hired the leading swing orchestras of the day. Robey spent three years in Los Angeles where he proprietored the Harlem Grill. Returning to Houston in 1945, he opened the swank-looking Bronze Peacock Dinner Club at 2809 Erastus Street. The club was partly financed with mob money.

Don Robey

When Reno and Las Vegas began to rapidly expand with clubs and gambling joints popping up on every corner, the Caucasian branch of the mob left Houston for greener pastures in Nevada. This left Robey out on a limb. Some say Robey, a light-skinned black, never forgave them for abandoning him. This alienation only hardened his hatred for whites. Despite this, and using prior knowledge of promotion, Robey brought all the top big bands to The Bronze Peacock and set up illegal Vegas-style gambling out the back. The club survived a series of raids, robberies and crackdowns.

Some time in 1946 he opened a record store at 4104 Lyons Avenue in the business district. He hired Evelyn Johnson (soon to become his long-serving secretary) to manage it. In 1947 Robey ventured into talent management. His first client was Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown who replaced his guitar-slinging rival "T" Bone Walker at The Bronze Peacock. Robey took Brown out to the Mesner brothers in Los Angeles to record for Aladdin. Unhappy by the fact that he did not have total control over his client's music, Robey came up with the notion of forming Peacock Records (having lifted the name from his nightspot.) Peacock Records came into being in November 1949. Evelyn Johnson became secretary, accountant and confidant. She also ran Robey's Buffalo Booking Agency later on. Thus Robey made himself one of the first African-Americans to own and operate a record business in the South. He, of course, also filled the role of A & R manager.

Many of his early 1500 series sides saw only local release. These were test pressings he used to scope out the local market. Because many of these never made it into the broader commercial market, gaps were

found in Robey's early discographical catalog. Most of his masters were cut at the Universal Company in Chicago. In June 1950 Robey tended his first gospel session with the Original Five Blind Boys of Mississippi (see ADDCD 3003 for details.) It was the initial success of the Five Blind Boys that lead to Robey's expansion of his gospel roster beginning in September 1951. Back in late 1949 Robey befriended Bill Holford. Holford had set up Houston's first all-purpose sound studio - A.C.A.- on Westheimer Street.

The Original Five Blind Boys of Mississippi

Following Gatemouth's initial December 1949 Peacock session, Robey recorded all his fresh talent at A.C.A. In late 1950 promotion man Irving Marcus was contracted to handle Peacock product out on the road.

During the spring of 1952 David James Mattis, deejay and program director at WDIA in Memphis, set up a record company called Duke with partner Bill Fitzgerald, a local record distributor. In June 1952 Mattis issued "God's chariot" - Parts 1 and 2 - by the Gospel Travelers (see ACMCD 4209 - Texas Gospel Vol. 1). Mattis, who had originally pumped $5,000 into starting his business, was doing well selling records, but his distributors were not paying their bills. Irving Marcus advised Mattis to go see Robey. Old pal Randy Woods at Dot Records advised against it.

On a visit to a record convention in New York in July, Mattis met Robey. The cash-strapped Mattis felt he had little choice when he cut a business deal with Robey to make him a partner. The agreement stated that Mattis would become a full partner, but an inactive one.

As Mattis's time was divided between working with Robey and at WDIA, he had set things up that way. But by November, Mattis, thinking he would make more money out of selling records (returns looked very promising), quit WDIA. Mattis then approached Robey to exercise his rights as a full "hands-on" partner. He demanded an advance on his property, but Robey refused, stating the company was not making enough money.

Mattis wanted a fair share of the profits made on the four R&B releases that he knew had sold well up to that point. Robey was lying through his teeth and would not back down. Mattis's insistence led to Robey grabbing his Colt 45 from a desk drawer. On advice of counsel, Mattis ended up selling his half of the partnership for a little more than a tenth of the profits.

Resumption of spiritual releases on Duke did not come about until March 1953 when Robey created the short-lived Duke 200 gospel series. Sixteen releases were issued, including three by the Southern Tones recorded in January 1954. The Southern Tones had masqueraded earlier as the Bells of Joy. The Austin-based Bells were unable to tour to promote their highly successful early recordings, and Robey saw it as in his best interests to give his promoters whatever they wanted (see ACMCD 4207 - The Bells of Joy for details.) The Tones had a soulful yet sorrowful sound.

The Sunset Travelers came to Duke in January 1953. Best known for their later early 1960s sides with O.V. Wright, the Sunsets, formed by baritone Grover Blake, came from Memphis. Blake rounded up a set of impressive Memphis street singers and added first lead tenor Sammy Lee Dortch from the Southern Wonders and baritone Rev. Willie James Lumpkin. When their second release, "Wish I was in heaven sitting down," was issued in December 1953 it started to make noise but because Dortch had commitments that prevented him from touring, the group was unable to get behind it to make it a hit. The original group disbanded, then Blake reformed the quartet around O.V. Wright in 1957.

The Sunset Travelers

The Mid-South Singers were a sanctified-sounding six-member quartet out of Detroit. They recorded for Joe Von Battle at JVB in 1951 before going to Duke in April 1953 where they waxed only two releases. Members included Major Douglas, lead tenor, "hard singer" Robert Crutcher, lead baritone (Crutcher went on to sing with Lou Rawls and the Chosen Gospel Singers in 1955 and later still with Claude Jeter & the Swan Silvertones - see Acrobat ADDCD 3004), Charles King, tenor, Delton Hudson, second baritone, Elester Sawyer, bass, with Charles Bradley serving as utility.

The Heaven Bound Four started out after World War II as a jubilee quartet. In 1949 they recorded for Swing Time Records, then moved on to Duke in May 1953. Group members included John H. Robbins, lead, W.C. Bore, John Robinson, Fortune Stevenson, Jesse King and Clarence Hopkins. Only two releases ever surfaced, one each in November 1953 and August 1955.

The Southern Wonders are discussed in our first collection (ACMCD 4209) as are the melodic Christland Singers out of Chicago lead by the legendary Rebert H. Harris beginning in October 1951. The Christlands cut two sessions for Peacock before moving on to Nashboro during the spring of 1955.

The Christian Travelers were founded by lead tenors Walter Thomas and Rev. J.D. Mitchell in St. Louis, Missouri in 1949. They were a seven-member group including "brothers" Mitchell and Tyler (other members' names are not known). The Christian Travelers toured the

length and breadth of the nation with a roster of leading quartets. They also backgrounded Sister Josephine James and her illustrious brother, the late Rev. Cleophus Robinson who, in all probability, brought the group to Don Robey's attention. They enjoyed only two releases on Peacock, one in June 1953 and a second in October 1954 which brought us the sorrowfully beautiful "Only a pilgrim" during Christmas of that year.

After recording for St. Louis's Zudan label in the early 1970s, they hooked up with Bro. Henderson in Los Angeles who recorded an album's worth of material for his Glory Bound Production Company. Five younger replace- ment members were in the group at that time. The Glory Bound material was leased to Kent Records who issued the results on an album in the mid-1970s.

The Christian Travelers

When glancing at Robey's Peacock and Songbird (a label founded in late 1963) gospel album catalogs, you get an idea of how deeply involved he was in making and supplying gospel product for the Southern market which he inevitably "cornered" during the Golden Era (1950s). Issues of gospel albums far outnumbered rhythm and blues releases. There is no denying the fact that in later years (the 1960s), the Peacock label became principally a gospel label despite the fact that Bobby Bland enjoyed eight album releases (up to March 1968) and O.V. Wright as a soul-singing star only five.

Robey's gospel sales equalled, if not exceeded, those from his R & B department. Since Robey's departure from the record industry in May 1973 gospel quartet has taken a back seat to the ever-increasing popularity of the mass choir. To my ears, one can rarely compare this seemingly democratic ensemble approach to African-American gospel singing with the sheer magic and vigor of watching a quartet whose harmonies are as tight as steel doors and whose soaring, sometimes ecstatic, swing-led supplicants reach out and almost touch a piece of heavenly paradise.

Opal Louis Nations

Photographs on cover clockwise from top right hand corner - **SOUTHERN WONDERS, SUNSET TRAVELERS, CHRISTIAN TRAVELERS, CHRISTLAND SINGERS**

All illustrations courtesy of Galen Gart's "First Pressings" - Big Nickel Publications and Opal Louis Nations. This CD derives from very rare and old 78rpm recordings many of which were originally manufactured in small quantities. There will therefore be a significant amount of surface noise audible. Whilst we have removed much extraneous noise it was considered that any further use of noise reduction programmes would compromise the integrity of the original recordings.