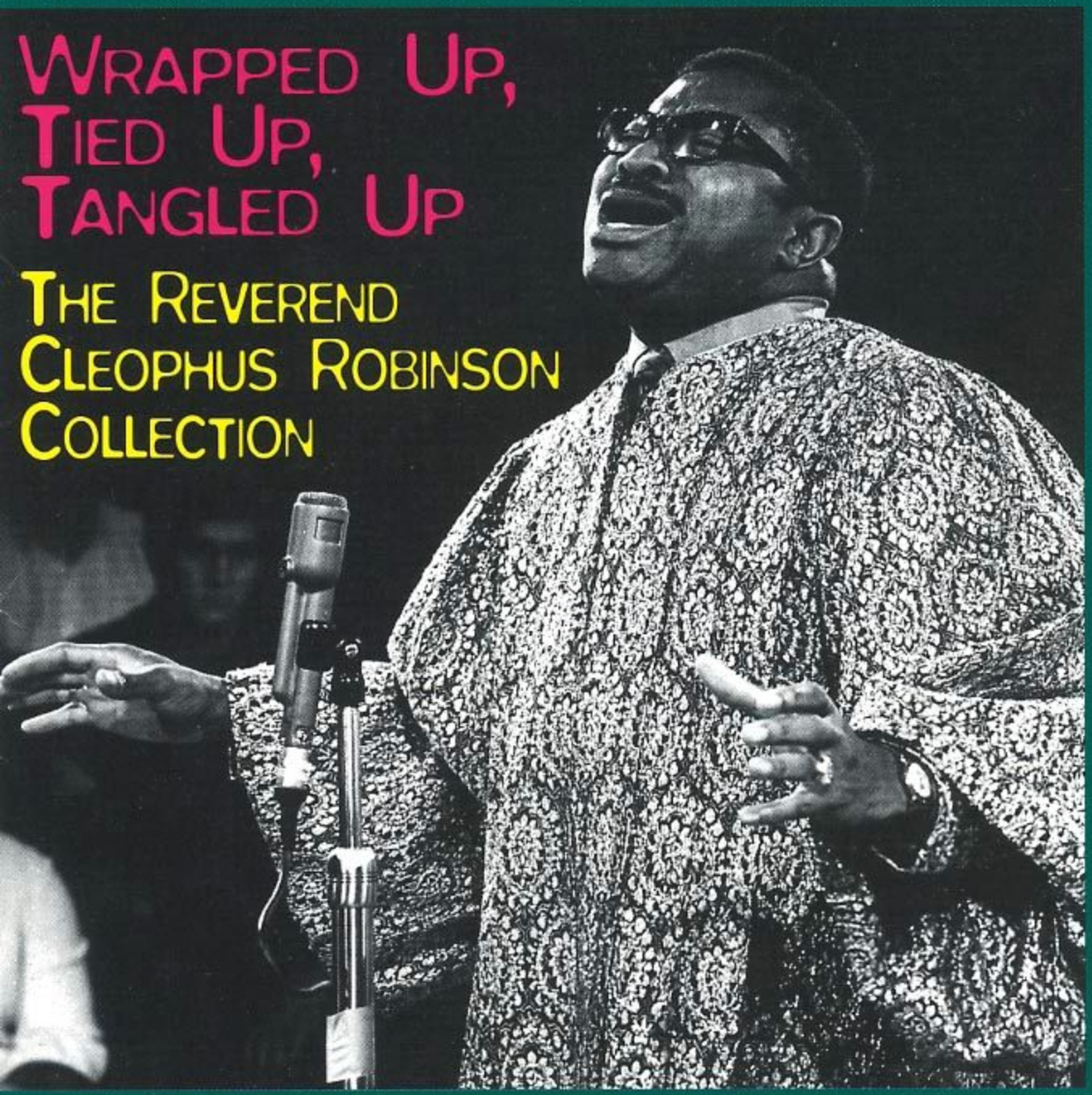
Wrapped Up, Tied Up, Tangled Up

The Reverend Cleophus Robinson Collection



Rev. Cleophus Robinson

Rev. Cleophus Robinson is head of an immeasurably talented musical family. His wife, Bertha L. Robinson, who shared vocal chores with him on their 1957 hit record for Peacock, "Leaning on the Lord," is a formidable vocalist in her own right. The six Robinson children are all musically gifted. Rev. Cleophus Robinson junior, singer, organist, and choir director, is fast becoming a major gospel recording artist. Linda Robinson McCaskill is a vocalist of great warmth and compassion. Rev. Paul "Cadillac" Robinson is both singer and drummer. Priscilla Robinson Wiley is yet another gifted soloist. Rev. Shadrach Robinson is a singer, orator, and accomplished keyboard musician. Aquilla "Mother" Robinson is singer, flutist, and choir director. Let us not forget Rev. Robinson senior's sister, Josephine James with whom the preacher shared his best selling and fondest remembered recording, "Pray for me," again waxed for Peacock in 1956.

Josephine entered upon a successful solo career in 1961 and became enormously popular on the European gospel circuit during the late Sixties. Not wanting to leave out any gifted member of his aspiring musical family, Robinson senior recorded "God's sons and daughters" with his niece, Catherine Gill in 1964. Three years later, he proudly etched a single with his mother, Lillie Robinson. The song was appropriately entitled "Old time moan" and brought back childhood memories of being moved and inspired by hearing her sing and moan at the family's tiny rural clapboard church in Mississippi—St. John's of Canton.

Robinson senior was born in Canton on March 18, 1932, the youngest of nine children. Robinson drew the attention of local neighbors with his late evening gospel recitals, most often rendered when bringing in the cows. On August 9, 1938 at St. John's of Canton, the young Robinson "got converted." He made a habit of singing with his mother at the church on Sundays. Sometimes this habit proved remunerative. On March 19, 1948 at the tender age of sixteen, Robinson left Canton to seek his fortune. He landed in Jackson, Mississippi where he worked in construction during the day and in various restaurant kitchens during the evenings. After a few weeks, he had saved enough money for his bus fare to Chicago—the promised land.

For eighteen months, young Robinson sang as guest on programs in a handful of churches. He became a member of The Greater Harvest Baptist Church pastored by Revered Louis Boddie. In late 1949, a singing tour found Robinson in Memphis where he took the opportunity of visiting his uncle, The Reverend L.A. Hamlin who pastored his own church. Hamlin persuaded Robinson to complete his education. Robinson received his high school diploma from Manassas High and went on to study drama at Lemoyne College. Meanwhile, Robinson had become very popular back at his uncle's church. His singing was being recorded by a local radio station which broadcast Robinson's efforts weekly on a program entitled "The Voice of the Soul."

Requests came in from listeners all over the South for Robinson to sing "Just over the hill." Evelyn Gay of the famous Gay Sisters of Chicago who recorded for Savoy introduced Robinson to Lee Egalnick of Miracle Records whose widest known releases were those of Sonny Thompson and Memphis Slim. Robinson had many offers from quartets but did not want to be a group singer, preferring to stay a soloist like the artists he most admired—Mahalia Jackson and Brother Joe May. In September of 1949, Robinson cut four songs for Miracle Records. From this Egalnick issued one single, "Now Lord" / "I love the name Jesus." Robinson's singing lacked depth and a sense of self confidence. This was reflected in the shortage of sales.

In 1950, Robinson played his first major concert at the famous Mason Temple in Memphis, the heart of The Church of God in Christ denomination. In early 1953, Robinson hitched up with the extremely talented pianist, Napoleon Brown, with whom he recorded right up to Brown's death in April, 1978. Some time in June 1953, Robinson was brought to the attention of Don Robey, president of Peacock Records in Houston. Old friend Brother Joe May of St. Louis had sung Robinson's praises to Robey's booking agent, Evelyn Johnson who passed the word along. May became one of Robinson's closest friends and was responsible for persuading him to relocate to St. Louis in 1957.

Robinson's first session for Peacock came about in July 1953. As vocal groups proved more popular in gospel than soloists in terms of sales at that time, Robey had Robinson placed with the legendary Spirit of Memphis Quartet, who had signed to the label some six months previously. Three sessions in all were shared with

The Spirits. Ten tunes were issued over a period of three years. All but one featured a quartet background. None of the sides sold in appreciable amounts at their time of issue and all sadly remain collectors' items to this day.

In the spring of 1956, Robinson tried to sell Robey on the idea of recording himself and his sister Josephine in a live, spontaneous church setting. Robey, knowing how well Robinson could generate excitement during a church service, readily agreed and had the couple record together that May. The result was the run-away hit, "Pray for me." The billing on the label read "Rev. Cleophus Robinson and his sister Josephine James." By February 1957, Robinson had moved from Memphis to St. Louis, married Bertha, and was installed as pastor of The Greater Bethlehem Baptist Church on Washington Street.

As his congregation grew to twelve hundred souls, Robinson raised enough money to renovate and refurnish the building to accommodate the extra flock. Robinson's first Sunday radio broadcast from the church came about in June, 1959. The program, entitled "Hour of Faith," went out weekly at six p.m. over KATZ. Robinson stayed with Peacock Records until 1962, but Bertha actively remained with the company up to 1969. During the 1962-63 period, Robinson cut three albums for Orrin Keepnews at Battle/Riverside Records in Chicago. Of the three, one collection remained unissued until last year and another featured Jessy Dixon and The Gospel Chimes on vocal backgrounds. However, with Battle's demise, Robinson was back on Peacock by late 1963, where he continued to record from his church with The Bethlehem Baptist Church Choir under the supervision of singer/director Coretha Bell.

Robinson became one of the first regular black t.v. preachers when on April the 4th 1964 he originated together with Louis Bates a ten-minute weekly spot on KPLR, broadcast simultaneously over several cable networks. The show grew so widely popular it was expanded to thirty minutes. From September 1964 to July 1965, Robinson waxed for Savoy out of New Jersey. During this time, he recorded "How sweet it is to be loved by God," an extremely successful reworking of Marvin Gaye's Motown original "How sweet it is to be loved by you." By Christmas 1965, Robinson was back on Peacock in time for his parishional version of the seasonal evergreen "Silent night," which drew considerable attention. Robinson was the first minister to preach a sermon in its entirety at Harlem's Apollo Theater on Palm Sunday in 1966. In 1967, Robinson enjoyed his first European tour and was recorded in Amsterdam as trouper with The Spiritual and Gospel Festival for the German Fontana label. However, Robinson remained under contract with Peacock until 1969, when he parted from the label for good. Throughout the Sixties Robinson put many aspiring gospel singers into the spotlight. These included The O'Neal Twins, Rev. Oris Mays, Beatrice Haynes, and Victoria Hawkins. Right after being voted the nation's number one gospel soloist by The National Association of T.V. and Radio Announcers, Robinson signed with Nashboro Records, with whom he recorded eighteen albums. Our track selection draws from the best of five of these collections.

An admirable version of "He'll open doors," in waltz time opens the set. Robinson pitches and yaws around the melody while a female chorus adds gloss

to a gutsy accompaniment led by a fervent organ. The touchingly conveyed "Prayer song" is one of Robinson's strongest vehicles with its tender testimony and Loving Sisters-like soulful vocal support. A righteous organ riff supports a bluesy offering of "My vacation," a cover of Brother Joe May's daughter Annette's popular anthem, "Vacation in Heaven" of 1955. Testimony awakens an almost operatic coloring of Fanny J. Crosby's "Blessed assurance." Robinson squeezes every ounce of feeling out of the song as momentous organ and piano add zeal.

The rocking "Look away" finds Robinson shaking it up and having a good time with Sister Josephine James. "Wrapped up, tied up, tangled up" is perhaps Robinson's most successful recording on Nashboro. He tells me he continues to get requests to do the song whenever he gives a concert. The tune has an irresistible rhythm that cannot help get the spirit moving. Clapping assists fine, straight-ahead singing. Sister Josephine joins the preacher on the final choruses. "Down by the river" is a pretty song, and Robinson's customary solid organ and piano never weaken in their support. Robinson hums and moans and adds his personal stamp.

Choral dressing and stone bad organ maintain a soulful character on "A better place somewhere." Both "I wake up this morning" and "Pass me not" are graced with the presence of the recently retired Christian Travelers of St. Louis. The Christian Travelers were founded in 1949. By the summer of 1953, the seven-member outfit was signed to Peacock Records with whom the boys cut only two releases, both fine examples of almost acappella singing (accompanied only with drums.)

After a one-shot deal with the Zudan label, the group faded into obscurity until the early Seventies when Garland Lee had a reconstituted Christian Travelers record for Kent out of Los Angeles, through a deal he had made with influential gospel deejay and Proverb Records proprietor, Brother Henderson. The group at that time, the same as featured on these two cuts, included three original members, James Wafer, Rev. J.D. Mitchell, and Walter Thomas. "I woke up this morning" is sung with verve and conviction and sticks to the traditional treatment. "Pass me not" is soothingly rendered and holds to Fanny J. Crosby's original score.

Robinson uses every conceivable way to bend a note on the foot-tapping "Travelin' shoes" on which the band is allowed to stretch out without rein. "Nothing but God's word" contains some of Robinson's best written lyrics. The preacher introduces the verse and The Bethlehem Baptist Choir joins in on the chorus. Robinson flexes his falsetto ability at every given opportunity. The piano is allowed to wander extensively around the melody of "Where my Jesus is" which is highlighted by a striking choral arrangement.

The remake of Robinson's 1964 Peacock best seller, "Elijah rock," differs from his original in feel and propulsion. Robinson exercises a measure of vocal tenseness when the song is slowed mid-way through. A standard concert singing approach is chosen to project an operatic rendering of "Even me" which stretches the Roberta Martin 1946 arrangement to suit the preacher's ability. A pleasing, well-balanced performance is given the mournful spiritual "Soon I will be done with the troubles of the world" whereon the rhythm background stays within the dirge-like song's boundaries.

"Can't you see" is a pleasant departure from standard fare with its clever Latin rhythm and unusual chart. The fabulous "Poor boy from Mississippi" is blues to the core with its wailing harmonica and taunting guitar. Robinson agonizingly unfolds the story of his Mississippi country roots. "Ain't nobody's business" introduces us to Robinson in a major live concert setting. The song is well received and given a jazzy treatment. The preacher lays on the passion as only he knows how. "How many stars," our closing selection," finds us back in the vocal group configuration. Robinson sings with the usual grit and gusto, and the quartet stays respectfully within the confines of incantational support.

Over the years, Robinson has performed at many major world class venues. Some of these include New York's Lincoln Center, Cobo Hall in Detroit, Carnegie Hall, Washington, D.C.'s Constitutional Hall, and at the University of Jerusalem in the Holy City at which Robinson became the first African American artist to appear in concert.

Rev. Cleophus Robinson continues to tour the world, singing and preaching and setting his audiences afire.

— Opal Louis Nations · April 1995