# Reverend CLEOPHUS ROBINSON

## SOMEONE TO CARE

*The Battle Sessions*

Specialty

LEGENDS OF GOSPEL

The Bethlehem Missionary Baptist Church at 4005 Washington Boulevard in St. Louis had for many years been distinguished as a landmark on the must-visit list of many a tourist to the city until the night of August 16, 1992 when an unidentified arsonist set fire to it. The church had remained under Reverend Cleophus Robinson's industrious pastorship since 1957. However much the church suffered, the catastrophe did not hamper other enterprises under the preacher's management, such as the Cleophus Robinson Scholarship Farm, a fund founded in 1967 to aid African-American students who wished to become doctors, preachers, and business people. The farm lies in Canton, Mississippi, approximately 170 miles south of Memphis on old Highway 51 (I-55), just north of Jackson. Canton is a suburban sprawl now, but back in the Thirties it was part of a rural farming community where Lillie and Coleman Robinson, Cleophus's parents, worked a parcel of land. Cleophus was born March 18, 1932, the youngest of nine brothers and sisters. Robinson family legend tells of how the three-year-old babe Cleophus warbled his first song—"Who Will Be Able to Stand?" I was sitting on mama's lap, staring pensively into the blazing hearth, when suddenly I leaped up singing and my sister Josephine, with a startled expression on her face, exclaimed, 'Look, look mama, the baby is singing.'" Be that as it may, the child Cleophus sang his heart out in the cotton fields and at calla gatherings. (Neighbors far away could hear him.) Cleophus asserts that his strongest formal influence was his mother, whose vocal robustness was likened to Mahalia Jackson and whose reputation had spread throughout the churches of the county.

In 1967, during Robinson's second tenure with Peacock Records, he cut a single with his mom, then 76-years of age, entitled "Old Time Moaning," a dirge he might have caught as a child coming from the moaners' bench and rising above the rickety clapboard walls of a country church. The prepubescent Cleophus gave solo recitals at his local place of worship, St. John's Church of Canton, where on August 9, 1938 he "got converted." Ten years later, on May 6, 1948, Cleophus quit his rural surroundings and headed for Chicago, where he settled for 18 months, singing in various churches, appearing on programs beside his guiding light, Mahalia, with the Roberta Martin Singers, and guesting on the occasional radio broadcast. As well as developing a fondness for going out over the airwaves, Cleophus met up with the late Evelyn Gay, one half of the then-famous Gay Sisters (who multiplied their fortunes in 1951 on Savoy Records with Civilla D. Martin's "God Will Take Care of You"). Evelyn introduced Cleophus to Lee Egalnick of Miracle Records. The end result was one session in September 1949 where four songs were recorded. Miracle chose to issue only one single, "Now Lord"/"I Love the Name Jesus" with Cleophus label-copied as Bro Cleophus Robinson. This shellac was reissued on King Records' Federal subsidiary when Syd Nathan acquired the Miracle catalog shortly thereafter. Both songs were rendered with a measure of conviction but overall lacked any special merit. This must have proved to be the general view of the gospel-record buying public as sales figures were poor.

Toward the close of 1949, Cleophus moved to Memphis where he was taken in by his uncle, the late Reverend L.A. Hamblin, the same man who recorded the sermon "When God Walks Out of the Field" for Jewel Records in 1968. Hamblin persuaded the impressionable Robinson to finish high school. This was an extremely active period for Cleophus. One of his first achievements was the initiation of a weekly radio broadcast—"The Voice of the Soul"—emanating out of Reverend Hamblin's church. Robinson's weekly broadcast not only spread the word but compounded his reputation as a singer. During his final year at Manassas High in Memphis, Cleophus met many reputable gospel artists, as most appeared on his program when passing through town. One such was Brother Joe May, who seemed much impressed with Cleophus's style and delivery. May became a strong influence and close friend of Robinson's. It was during this time that Cleophus befriended pianist Napoleon Brown, an extremely gifted musician who stayed with Cleophus, appearing on both records and live appearances right up to his sad demise on April 17, 1978.

June 1953 was a busy month for Brother Cleophus as Brother Joe May had contacted Evelyn Johnson of the Buffalo

Booking Agency, who in turn brought Robinson to the attention of Don Robey, head of Peacock Records in Houston. Brother Robinson's first session for Peacock took place at Manassas High in July 1953. Cleophus had asked the legendary Spirit of Memphis, who had signed with Peacock some six months earlier, to provide vocal backgrounds at the session. Four songs were committed to tape, only one of which, "In the Sweet By and By," Robinson's initial release, utilized the services of the quartet which at that time was ranked with its most formidable soloists, namely Jethroe Bledsoe, Little Axe, and Silas Steele. The song starts dramatically at a slow tempo and doubles midway to a four-four beat with the group briskly chanting behind Robinson's impressive wailings. The reverse, "When I Can Read My Title Clear," is sung and at times moaned with dramatic pathos, revealing the occasional squall punctuated by sustained organ.

On Robinson's second release from the first session, he solos on both selections, which may have proved less remunerative as subsequent recordings cut in 1954 and 1955 find him back with the Spirit of Memphis who had undergone some reshuffling of personnel. Although none of these sides sold dramatically, sales figures must have proved sufficient enough to warrant contract renewal. By the summer of 1953, having graduated Manassas High, Cleophus had reached a crossroads: whether to take up gospel singing professionally now that he was under contract to Peacock or pursue his love of the dramatic arts. Deciding on acting as a career, Cleophus enrolled at Leymole College and signed to a course majoring in Drama. During his first year in college, Robinson was asked repeatedly to fulfill engagements to promote his records. This drew him away form his studies. As a consequence, when a year had elapsed, Cleophus had to choose between the open road and the classroom. Robinson of course chose gospel singing.

By January 1956, after the release of his final recording with Willie Jefferson and the Spirit of Memphis, Robinson decided, perhaps due to a disappointingly lukewarm acceptance of his work, to pursue a different mode of approach. "I called Don Robey as I came up with the idea of Josephine, my sister, and I doing a record together and he liked the idea," recalls Robinson. Label-copied as Reverend Cleophus Robinson and his sister Josephine James, "Pray for Me,"/"When I Cross Over" hit the record racks in April 1956. "Pray for Me," written by Robinson, became his first successful waxing. The reverse was penned by a friend, Wenatta Lancey, from St. Louis. Josephine, whose magnificent voice can best be compared to the tonal shadings of Marion Williams, recorded many major-selling sides with and without her brother up to and beyond the end of his first contract with Peacock in 1967.

In 1957, Robinson moved from Memphis to St. Louis, where he married Bertha Robinson and took up a calling at the Bethlehem Missionary Baptist Church. All three, Cleophus, Bertha, and Josephine, can be heard on the Robinsons' first Peacock album, "Pray for Me," which hit the stores in early 1962. Bertha's first solo outings were cut for Peacock in 1963, shortly before Cleophus contracted to Battle, a subsidiary of Riverside. "What happened was Don Robey wasn't paying me no money, and when I got the deal from Battle Records, I was freelance at the time," he explains. "I had been with him [Robey] for so long he just thought that I wasn't gonna seek for to better myself. Roebuck Staples [of the Staple Singers] had made some big recordings for Battle [actually Riverside] and I used to promote him here [St. Louis] at the Keel Auditorium. I had known him for a long time, and it was Roebuck that recommended me to Orrin Keepnews."

Orrin had worked with the Staple Singers since 1962 and over a period of three years produced four albums for them. Keepnews conducted two sessions with Robinson. Two albums were released and another was in the can but not issued due to the label's sudden demise. The Gospel Chimes, who were asked to sing backgrounds by Cleophus himself, appear on at least one of the sessions and were simply billed as "chorus" on the album releases due to contractual obligations to Savoy Records of New Jersey. Jessy Dixon's Original Gospel Chimes were organized in November 1957 in Chicago. They were signed to Hob Records in 1960, where at first they supported Reverend James Cleveland but later gained broad acclaim in their own right. Dorothy Norwood, one of the quartet's original members, quit in late 1961 to pursue a successful solo career on

Savoy. She was replaced by the indomitable Imogene Greene, who had served with the Davis Sisters (1952), the Caravans (1956), and again with the Davis Sisters prior to the Chimes.

The Gospel Chimes certainly add grace, drama, and grit to Robinson's singing, moaning, and wailing vocal style, its roots embedded in the swampy lowlands of Mississippi. The Chimes returned to Hob after the Robinson sessions and ended up on Atlantic in 1967. Rarely has Robinson seemed so moved by the spirit as on these sides which draw from the very core of his spiritual being.

In 1964, Robinson returned to Peacock and enjoyed some degree of acclaim with "Solemn Prayer." Cleophus boasts of being "the first gospel artist to hit with a praying-record." Peacock singles and live albums ensued featuring the talents of Bertha Robinson, Beatrice Haynes, Coretha Bell, Reverend Oris May and, to add fuel to nepotism, niece Catharine Gill. The choir of Robinson's Bethlehem M.B.C. was given over to the able supervision of Genesa Smith, once lead of the Genesa Smith Singers, a female combination out of Chicago.

By late 1964, Cleophus was signed with the ubiquitous Savoy label, where during the fall of 1965 he again met with healthy record sales for "How Sweet It Is to Be Loved By God." By Christmas 1965, he was back at Peacock cutting singles and albums in a gutsy yet bluesy vein, augmented by the slick licks of guitarists Sterling Lance or Raney Williams. In 1967, Cleophus, along with Sister Josephine, set out on his first European tour, stopping off in Holland, France, Switzerland, and Spain, ending up at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. He even found time to have himself baptized in the River Jordan.

In Holland, Cleophus recorded for Fontana before chalking up yet another two years with Peacock. In 1969, he hit the jackpot. Having signed with Nashboro, he struck pay dirt with "Wrapped Up, Tied Up, Tangled Up," his second 45 release. The record crossed over into the white market. Always making full use of the broadcast media, throughout the Sixties Cleophus hosted his "Hour of Faith" radio program every Sunday, five to six p.m., over KATZ by remote from his church. As if this was not enough, he utilized the visual media in 1964 by orchestrating a coast-to-coast gospel TV show that aired continuously for 25 years. In 1975 he was recorded live at the Montreux Jazz Festival in Switzerland. The success of "Wrapped Up, Tied Up, Tangled Up" led to a lucrative deal to make eight albums for Savoy in the late Seventies.

In 1980, Robinson was asked to sing at the White House by President Carter, who was then running for re-election. Cleophus even had his picture taken with Carter for *Time* magazine. In 1986, Cleophus signed with AIR Records, and last year he scored again with "Save a Seat for Me," sharing vocal chores with Reverend Clay Evans on Savoy.

With the Greater Bethlehem Baptist Church of St. Louis now freshly renovated and ready for a much published inaugural service on Sunday June 20, 1993, I asked Cleophus how he felt about the new church. "Oh, it looks like a shiny new palace," he said, "and we've even added an extra 24 feet." Robinson has met his adversaries and triumphed.

— OPAL NATIONS, 1993

**CLEOPHUS ROBINSON**—VOCALS

**SEPTEMBER 18, 1962**
UNIVERSAL RECORDING STUDIOS, CHICAGO

**THE GOSPEL CHIMES:**
**JESSY DIXON, IMOGENE GREEN,**
**CLAUDE O. TIMMONS,**
**LEE CHARLES NEELY**—VOCALS
**NAPOLEON BROWN**—PIANO
**MACEO WOODS**—ORGAN
**MARSHALL THOMPSON**—DRUMS

"GRACE MADE A CHANGE," "I KNOW PRAYER CHANGES THINGS," "JESUS MET THE WOMAN AT THE WELL," "UNTIL I FOUND THE LORD," "GOING OVER YONDER," "STRANGE THINGS HAPPENING," "CONSECRATED"

**SEPTEMBER 19, 1962**
UNIVERSAL RECORDING STUDIOS, CHICAGO

**ROEBUCK STAPLES**—VOCALS
(ON "FARTHER ALONG" ONLY)
**NAPOLEON BROWN**—PIANO
**MACEO WOODS**—ORGAN
**AL DUNCAN**—DRUMS

"WAITING FOR JESUS," "I'M GOING TO LEAVE YOU IN THE HANDS OF THE LORD," "YOU'VE GOT TO LOVE EVERYBODY," "NO MORE THAN YOU CAN BEAR," "I CAN'T HELP IT," "WE'LL UNDERSTAND IT BETTER BY AND BY," "FARTHER ALONG," "LORD, I'M IN YOUR CARE," "WHEN THE SAINTS GO MARCHING IN," "SOMETIMES I FEEL LIKE A MOTHERLESS CHILD"

**SEPTEMBER 25, 1963**
UNIVERSAL RECORDING STUDIOS, CHICAGO

**THE GOSPEL CHIMES:**
**JESSY DIXON, IMOGENE GREENE,**
**CLAUDE O. TIMMONS,**
**LEE CHARLES NEELY**—VOCALS
**NAPOLEON BROWN**—PIANO
**MACEO WOODS**—ORGAN
UNKNOWN DRUMS

"GET AWAY JORDAN," "BEFORE THIS TIME ANOTHER YEAR," "MORNING AND EVENING," "SOMEONE TO CARE," "LET THE CHURCH ROLL ON," "(KEEP ME) NEAR THE CROSS," "IT WON'T HURT YOU TO SPEAK," "PEACE IN THE VALLEY"

**SEPTEMBER 26, 1963**
UNIVERSAL RECORDING STUDIOS, CHICAGO

**NAPOLEON BROWN**—PIANO
**MACEO WOODS**—ORGAN
**JOHNNY PATE**—BASS
UNKNOWN DRUMS

"WHEN THE SUN GOES DOWN"

ORIGINAL SESSIONS PRODUCED BY
**ORRIN KEEPNEWS**

ORIGINAL SESSIONS ENGINEERED BY
**BRUCE SWEDIEN**

COMPILED AND PRODUCED FOR REISSUE BY
**LEE HILDEBRAND** AND **OPAL NATIONS**

DIGITAL TRANSFERS FROM ANALOG MASTER TAPES BY **RICHARD DUARTE.**

DIGITAL REMASTERING, 1993—**JOE TARANTINO**
(FANTASY STUDIOS, BERKELEY)

SERIES SUPERVISION BY
**LEE HILDEBRAND** AND **OPAL NATIONS**

ART DIRECTION—**PHIL CARROLL**
DESIGN—**DEB SIBONY**
COVER PHOTO COURTESY OF
**REV. CLEOPHUS ROBINSON REV.**

#1-9 PREVIOUSLY UNISSUED;
#10-18 PREVIOUSLY RELEASED ON BATTLE BLP-6116;
#19-26 ON BATTLE BLP-6124

1. **GET AWAY JORDAN** 3:01
*September 25, 1963 (W. McDade)*
*Martin & Morris Music-BMI*

2. **BEFORE THIS TIME ANOTHER YEAR** 3:25
*September 25, 1963 (Isaac Watts) P.D.*

3. **MORNING AND EVENING** 2:39
*September 25, 1963 (Cleophus Robinson)*
*Paul & Shad Music-BMI*

4. **SOMEONE TO CARE** 4:01
*September 25, 1963 (Jimmy Davis) Peer Int'l-BMI*

5. **LET THE CHURCH ROLL ON** 1:53
*September 25, 1963 (traditional)*

6. **(KEEP ME) NEAR THE CROSS** 3:12
*September 25, 1963 (Fanny J. Crosby)*
*Stamps Baxter Music-BMI*

7. **IT WON'T HURT YOU TO SPEAK** 3:15
*September 25, 1963 (Robinson) Paul & Shad-BMI*

8. **PEACE IN THE VALLEY** 3:21
*September 25, 1963 (Thomas A. Dorsey)*
*Unichappell Music-BMI*

9. **WHEN THE SUN GOES DOWN** 2:47
*September 26, 1963 (Robinson) Paul & Shad-BMI*

10. **GRACE MADE A CHANGE** 3:43
*September 18, 1962 (Robinson) Paul & Shad-BMI*

11. **I KNOW PRAYER CHANGES THINGS** 2:12
*September 18, 1962 (Robert Anderson)*
*Unichappell Music-BMI*

12. **WAITING FOR JESUS** 2:49
*September 19, 1962 (Robinson) Paul & Shad-BMI*

13. **JESUS MET THE WOMAN AT THE WELL** 2:44
*September 18, 1962 (J.W. Alexander)*
*Martin & Morris-BMI*

14. **UNTIL I FOUND THE LORD** 2:12
*September 18, 1962 (Robinson) Paul & Shad-BMI*

15. **I'M GOING TO LEAVE YOU IN THE HANDS OF THE LORD** 2:36
*September 19, 1962 (P.D.)*

16. **GOING OVER YONDER** 2:43
*September 18, 1962 (Margaret Allison)*
*Excellorec Music-BMI*

17. **STRANGE THINGS HAPPENING** 2:28
*September 18, 1962 (Rosetta Tharpe)*
*Regent Music-BMI*

18. **CONSECRATED** 2:01
*September 18, 1962 (Robinson) Paul & Shad-BMI*

19. **YOU'VE GOT TO LOVE EVERYBODY** 2:24
*September 19, 1962 (Robinson) Paul & Shad-BMI*

20. **NO MORE THAN YOU CAN BEAR** 3:05
*September 25, 1963 (Robinson) Paul & Shad-BMI*

21. **I CAN'T HELP IT** 2:23
*September 19, 1962 (Robinson) Paul & Shad-BMI*

22. **WE'LL UNDERSTAND IT BETTER BY AND BY** 2:46
*September 19, 1962 (C.A. Tindley)*
*Martin & Morris-BMI*

23. **FARTHER ALONG (WITH ROEBUCK STAPLES)** 2:33
*September 19, 1962 (Stevens-Hughes)*
*The Rodeheaver Co.-ASCAP*

24. **LORD, I'M IN YOUR CARE** 2:15
*September 19, 1962 (Willie Mae Ford Smith)*
*publ. unknown*

25. **WHEN THE SAINTS GO MARCHING IN** 2:18
*September 19, 1962 (traditional)*

26. **SOMETIMES I FEEL LIKE A MOTHERLESS CHILD** 4:34
*September 19, 1962 (traditional)*

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