The Best Of The Salem Travelers

The Salem Travelers

The saga of The Salem Travelers begins with George Leaner. Leaner was born in Mississippi in 1917 and migrated with his family to Chicago in 1923. George occasionally helped out at his sister Bernice's record emporium—The Groove Record Shop at Forty-Seventh and South Parkway throughout the late Forties. In 1946, George Leaner became Lester Melrose's assistant. Melrose recorded most of Chicago's major blues talent above the premises of Eli's Pawn Shop on South State. After a stint with his brother Ernie at M.S. Distributors, George joined Monroe Passis's Chord Distributing where, in 1950, he found the opportunity to record Muddy Waters, Little Walter, and Baby Face Leroy for the Parkway label.

Ernie and George started up United Record Distributors in March, 1950, but it was not until 1962 that George independently ventured into establishing his own record company, One-derful Records. In a short time, as business prospered, Midas, M-Pac, Mar-V-lus, and the Halo gospel music subsidiary were added to the parent company. Leaner looked around for a strong male quartet and found one in Chester Feemster and The Salem Travelers. Feemster acted as manager and second lead in the group fronted by Arthur Davis. The Salem Travelers were part of the emerging early Sixties soul-gospel sound that included Jimmy Outler and The Soul Stirrers (then recording for Sam Cooke's Sar label) and James Phelps with The Clefs of Calvary who waxed for Tru-Sound Records in New York. Phelps replaced Outler in The Stirrers after Outler's demise in a knife fight.

All three aggregations were influenced by each other and in particular by the smooth high tenor acrobatics Sam Cooke and Johnnie Taylor introduced to the music via The Soul Stirrers throughout the Fifties. Outler, Phelps, and Davis all kept the Cooke sound alive in their writing and performances.

On February 19, 1963, The Salem Travelers composed of the late Chester Feemster (second lead), Arthur Davis (first lead), Timothy Bailey, Talmon Thomas, Bill Ford, and ace basso lead, the late Samuel Hanchette cut their first five numbers for Leaner's Halo label. Of the five compositions, only two, "Save me" / "Joy," were issued as the group's second single release later that year. "Joy" is a heartaching ballad whereon Davis sounding uncannily like Johnnie Taylor gives a haunting, liberating, note-flexing performance. "Save me" finds Samuel Hanchette in the hot seat. Hanchette's tender and moving phrases color the sound and give it an unusual melodic twist.

The Salem Travelers' initial release and also the first single in the Halo series, "Help me to hold on" backed by "I want to thank Him," (Halo 01), was pulled from the group's second session. "Help me to hold on," yet another ballad in the Cooke vein, is strong and fine but suffers from an annoying percussive accompaniment. "I want to thank Him" reminds one of early Joe Simon Vee Jay offerings with its winding melismas and well-crafted vocal shadings. The group's third Halo release of October 1965 has Davis bewilderingly billed on the label as Little David, after the harp-playing shepherd boy of the Old Testament.

The Salem's fourth offering was issued twice with two different top sides. The extremely hard to find "Give me a few more days" was later substituted for "Wade in the water," a hard-sung workout lifted from the Willa A. Townsend hymn. All in all, The Salem Travelers cut seven Monk Higgins-produced singles for Halo. One release found the group singing background behind the awesome pipes of Ida Mae Davis who went on to join Leola Lane and the gals in The Gospel Souls who themselves put out four smoking singles on Halo.

Two of the seven Salem Travelers 45s were later reissued on M-Pac. All were of outstanding quality, but none could compete against the Windy City's Chess and Vee Jay

output and heavier promotion. The Salem Travelers stayed with Leaner up until 1967 and the demise of the Halo label.

In 1968, with the addition of Robert Dixon (who later replaced Arthur Davis, when Davis took up the cloth), and the departure of Timothy Bailey, The Salem Travelers signed with Chess Records with whom the unit recorded three albums and several tracks covering a period of fifteen months. Outstanding output during this time included the beautiful "Don't disappoint the Lord," an anguished "Standing on the Calvary," a fervent "God makes it possible" on which Davis and Hanchette trade licks, plus two memorable Christmas songs on Checker LP 10050 entitled "A Christmas Dedication."

The album, issued in 1968, featured the group singing "Every year we say Merry Christmas," probably one of the finest Salem Travelers' etchings with its tight arrangement and deep soul interpretation. The second entry, "Merry Christmas to you," verges on equal praise.

During the Seventies, The Salem Travelers cut one album for Don Robey's Peacock label in Houston entitled "Wait on the Lord" (PLP 59214.) The collection bordered on Northern soul with its funk, stylized readings of "Games people play" and their original cover version of "Lucky old sun," a stab at keeping in step with the changing trends of the time.

In early 1981, The Salem Travelers signed with Nashboro Records. By now, Talmon Thomas and Bill Ford were gone and Jessie McDaniel along with Paul Smith and / or Joe Ocean had replaced them.

A measure of the group's old spirit is replenished as echoes of the old days are recalled with this carefully selected smattering of choice Nashboro sides. Our songfest beings with a Roscoe Robinson-like treatment of "Where the sun won't ever go down (Before this time another year.) Shouts and wails punctuate a fiery vocal treatment of the tune. Davis labors over an agonized reading of "Heaven is my goal" with the group jumping along in close chant. "Standing on Calvary, " demonstrates how well Davis could sound at home in both secular soul music and heart-sung gospel.

"Moving on" could have had Johnnie Taylor's name on it and no one would have questioned the error. Davis gives a shining performance full of persistence and compassion. Sweet, sweeping keyboards introduce us to a righteous "Just let Jesus come into your life." Davis howls, screams, and wails in front of a wall of irresistible choral harmony. The listener will find it impossible to avoid getting swept up in the sheer joy of the performance. The old spiritual, "I'm so glad," is given a mighty mirthful splash culminating in high voltage screaming reminiscent of Archie Brownlee getting happy back in the golden age of gospel.

"Thank you Lord" finds Davis back in Johnnie Taylor-land with his sweeping vocal statements and sweetly extended reiteration. Samuel Hanchette then takes the song into fresh realms with his deep grief-sounding bass. The song ends on a heightened plane in the holiness domain. An easy loping rhythm introduces us to "I just can't make it by myself," on which Davis moans out the worry and wrings out the mischief. Teasing guitar accompanies a cool coaxing of "When on the cross," a graphic depiction of Roman inhumanity. Davis boldly tells the story in song and text with the usual attention to constancy. Samuel Hanchette's magical re-rendering of "Lucky old sun" reminds one of some of Ellis Johnson's masterworks cut with The Harmonizing Four during the Fifties and Sixties. Hanchette gives Frankie Lane's million seller new found warmth and a touch of elegance.

"The stranger" starts with a sermonette centering around the release of a U.S. hostage in Iran. The lyrics of the music section try to evoke the feelings of a man in captivity, drawn from a supposed conversation Arthur Davis had with the freed man. Davis gets us to believe that the man's faith strengthened his chances for survival.

More anguish and drawn out passion are evoked on "Don't disappoint the Lord," a deep church ballad ornamented with occasional chimes. "Hungry child," the second and last composition pertaining to the woes of the world, outlines the fear of being poor and homeless. Davis tries to punch the message home with preacherly conviction.

The Salem Travelers were one of the ablest traditional gospel quartets of the last thirty-five years. This Nashboro release proves that the group fully deserves a second listen.

— Opal L. Nations - April 1995
with invaluable assistance from Robert Pruter

Executive Producers
Patti Drosins and Rob Santos

Originally produced by Shannon Williams and The Salem Travelers

Reissue produced by
Robert Y. Kim and Opal Louis Nations

Art Direction/Design by
Mitchell Kanner

Liner notes by Opal Louis Nations

Mastered by Walter DeVenne

Original photos courtesy of
AVI Archives

Project Assistant
Michael Russell

Special Thanks
Ray Funk, Robert Pruter and
Shannon Williams