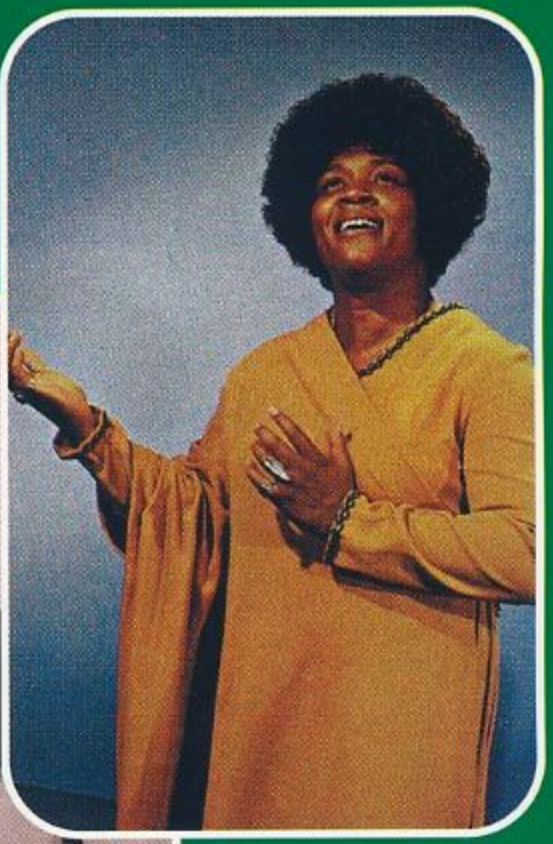
The Best Of
Sister Lucille Pope & The Pearly Gates



NASHBORO RECORDS

Sister Lucille Pope & The Pearly Gates

Sister Pope and The Pearly Gates are "country." When performing with sparse accompaniment the group excels and cooks up fine "down-home" gospel. The pressures of modern day musical trends do not allow this to happen too often. The addition of drum pads, loud distorting electric guitars, and synthesizers helps to sell records and satisfies younger demands. Be that as it may, Sister Pope's tough, yet smokey, compassionate voice can almost always be heard above the sometimes heavy laden rhythm accompaniment.

Pope was a farm gal and grew up doing hard honest work in the fields of Concord, Georgia. Lucille Hall, (her maiden name), was the youngest of four surviving children (four others died at birth.) Lucille came from a singing family. Her father, Harvey Hall, together with Uncles Hobert and Homer, often referred to as "The Three H's," sang in a shaped note vocal group which unfortunately resulted in Lucille's mother Della having to do more chores around the farm. Lucille spent her childhood humming around the house, picking up what she could from uncle Hobert who became her strongest inspiration and power behind a solid determination to make gospel singing in hand with teaching school her career. But somehow her religious aspirations always overshadowed her pedagogical ones.

Lucille Pope's two brothers together with her sister's husband and friends of the family formed the original Pearly Gates. The group hung together until Pope's brothers were called for National Service.

The family attended the old Mount Calvary Baptist Church in Concord and sang in a youth group formed from members of the church. During the pre-National Service period, the young Pope sang and toured all over Georgia with her brothers, the original Pearly Gates.

The family moved to Florida in 1948 but was back living in Griffin, Georgia by the time Pope first recorded in 1964. By the early 1960s, Sister Lucille Pope and The Pearly Gates were enjoying a weekly fifteen-minute Sunday morning radio broadcast over Griffin's WGRI, hosted by gospel deejay Ed Shane. One day Shane had Pope put together a radio jingle

which, when completed, was broadcast to a teenage audience. Surprisingly, the jingle met with phenomenal success. Spurred on by this, Shane asked Pope and The Pearly Gates to make studio demo tapes to hawk around record companies. At this point, The Pearly Gates consisted of Larry Blivens, Henry Milner, Sam Jennings, the late Willie Pope, James Willis, and Jack Ellis.

From the tapes Shane picked two songs, "Early one morning" on which Larry Blivens sang lead and "Almighty God" fronted by Pope. The tunes were pressed in a limited edition on Shane's Eddo (after Ed) label. Copies of the Eddo single were sent out to deejays and independent record companies. Vivian and John Carter, proprietors of Vee Jay Records in Chicago, were sufficiently interested in arranging a leasing deal and the single met with a wide audience when reborn as Vee Jay 943.

Chess Records also expressed interest in the Shane tapes and by Christmas 1964 had released the beautiful down-in-the-back-woods, country sounding "Jesus tore my heart to pieces" with Sam Jennings' incredible blow-bass backed with "Highway. " (Shane, currently based in Houston, later sold the rights to the two songs to Nashboro who reissued them on LP 7167).

Although "Jesus tore my heart to pieces" brought wide acclaim, Pope was reluctant to capitalize on its popularity. Being a country gal, she believed in working hard to gain success as opposed to simply becoming an overnight sensation. Consequently, it was over a decade before Pope and The Pearly Gates recorded again.

In 1975, Sister Lucille Pope and The Pearly Gates signed with Nashboro Records. The Nashboro originals consisted of old stalwarts Henry Miler and James Willis with fresh faces Kell Ponder, Willie Willis, Pope's second husband Brother Louis Alexander on organ and guitar plus Walter Holmes and Carlton Dixon on guitar.

This CD also includes cuts from four of The Pearly Gates' albums issued between 1976 and 1980.

Jesus tore my heart to pieces" has the group high-wailing behind an anguished Pope and Sam Jennings' prize-booming blow-bass. The Pearly Gates' use of harmony takes the mind back to 1960 when groups like The Whispering Spirits of Baltimore exacted the same tonal qualities. Twelve years had elapsed between the recording of the last cut and "Do you know what time it is," but listening to the latter makes one think that time might have stood still. The Pearly Gates had found a winning formula—why change it?

"Let's go back," with its swirling organ and mournful background singing, highlight Pope's plaintive groans. Sermonizing introduces "Lord, you've been good to me," a medium-paced exaltation given moaner's wretchedness. Like many solo Pope interpretations, "Don't be mean" is embroidered with strident piano, cool organ, and spoken innuendo.

Fine, high-spirited cresting harmonies stimulate a warm rendition of "Lord, I'm n your hands." The song

is improved with the occasional falsetto singer topping out to heighten the overall effect. Solid support is given a determined run-through of "Some Sweet day afterwhile," ending in symbol-thrashing punishment. One of Pope's better compositions is gospel ballad "It's so good" on which the usual grief is conveyed.

The Pearly Gates add pretty, sometimes ethereal, harmonies to the proceedings. "Leave them alone" reminds one of a tender Sixties soul anthem that might have suited the golden pipes of James Carr or O.V. Wright. "Leave them alone" is artfully sung by Pope with The Pearly Gates sparsely stepping in on the choruses. More heart-rending is witnessed on "Jesus was by my side," the last of six selections from the album of the same name recorded in 1977.

A customary Pearly Gates formula is restored on a Sensational Nightingales-type reading of "In your name" which has Pope wailing at full throttle. Smokey lead-work and sweeping harmonies embrace a touching engagement of "Give God the praise," a chart which builds to volcanic measure on the final verses.

"Somebody's gone" is a vehicle for Pope's personal testimony. Tasty jazz organ and unobtrusive harmonics make this a winning song. The Pearly Gates are back to a full-throated sound on "Man has changed, not God," a rocking screamer of much stamina.

Sister Lucille Pope and The Pearly Gates have managed to meld a sweet and pleasing sound from the best of town and country gospel, a sound which rarely strays from good old down-homey traditions.

— Opal L. Nations - March, 1995

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