

# Look Who's Coming!

THE FAMOUS  
**FIVE SOUL STIRRERS**  
OF HOUSTON, TEXAS



Bear in mind that we are just passing through. Don't fail to hear us. Our Motto is to Serve the Lord with Gladness. Come before His presence with singing.— Ps. 100: 2. The Soul Stirrers will appear

AT LONE STAR B B & Church  
 DATE MONDAY NIGHT MAY 25th  
 CITY Trinity Texas 1934

ADMISSION, 10 Cents

## The Soul Stirrers – The Early Days

### By Opal Louis Nations

Some might argue that the late 1950 to mid-1957 era (when Sam Cooke fronted the group) was the most poignant and imaginative period for the Soul Stirrers and for gospel music. Whichever view you take, it was not until 1989, sixty-three years after the group's coming together, that the Soul Stirrers were finally given their dues and inducted into The Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. By that time, only three of the six members from the late 1940s' line-up were left. Baritone James Haywood Medlock, born in East Texas on March 15, 1916 and sadly passed November 12 1991, lead tenor supreme Rebert Harvey (R.H.) Harris, born in Trinity, Texas on March 23, 1916 and who left this earth in Chicago on September 3, 2000, and tenor Senior Roy or Silas (S.R.) Crain, legally christened Senior Roy Grant, born June 7, 1911 in San Augustine, Texas. Crain, who died in Vallejo, California on September 13, 1996, is considered the "developing" founder of the group.

Crain started out with a bunch of gospel-singing teens out of Mt. Pilgrim Baptist Church in Trinity County. The group patterned themselves after the local Williams Brothers, a more professional unit. Crain filled in off and on with the Williams Brothers

and learned a good deal about teaching technique. Picking up on recordings made by established jubilee aggregations, the Mt. Pilgrim teenage group developed a clean, sweet sound that one local program-goer described as "soul stirring." Crain quickly adopted the moniker. When the kids finished country high school they headed for the big cities to find well-paid employment. Crain moved to Houston and got a job in a rice-mill.

One of the best of the local quartets was the New Pleasant Green Singers attached to the New Pleasant Baptist, managed by lead tenor Walter Lee "WL" LeBeau. The group, who rehearsed in an upper room at 1608 Andrew Street, needed a baritone. Crain sat in and was asked to join. This he agreed to do on condition that the group changed names to the Soul Stirrers. Crain had definite ideas and plans for where he was going with these fellows. The line-up included Edward Allen (EA) Rundless Jr of Walliceville, second tenor, LeBeau, lead tenor, Crain, baritone, and O.W. Thomas, bass. The group built a local following and was soon featured on Houston radio. Second baritone, A.L. Johnson from the Southern Gospel Singers, was added when LeBeau quit for the ministry in 1934. However, LeBeau appeared irregularly with the group for another two years.

All of the above members were in place when on February 12, 1936 Alan Lomax, on staff at the Library of Congress, made four field recordings of the quartet in Austin. The group's reading of Dorsey's "Standing by the bedside of a neighbor" excited Lomax a great deal. He considered the recordings not only poly-rhythmically strong but also a departure away from straight stand-up jubilee to a more deeply emotional style dwelling on higher tonal qualities, lighter bass singing, tight, more ethereal harmonies and an emphasis on long, floating falsetto passages.

The group reshaped itself as members joined and others dropped out. In 1936 basso Jesse James (J.J.) Farley, born on February 28, 1915 in Pennington, Texas, joined the group. In 1937, lead tenor Rebert H. Harris, who had sung in his family gospel group, the Friendly Five, was brought in. Harris's father, Rev. James S. Harris, a shape-note singing teacher in Trinity, had much to do with his son's vocal influence and development. Together with the country yodeling the young Rebert picked up from C&W programming on the farm radio, he perfected a beautiful melismatic style full of breathless, sweeping glissandos, never matched by anyone, before or since, with quite the same skill.

Other Trinity singers followed with the inclusion of Harris's cousin, baritone Mozel L. Franklin and baritone Thomas L. Brewster (born July 16, 1913.) By now the introduction of swing lead tenor, or two lead singers alternating to heighten tensions in a song, had added extra excitement to gospel quartet. The Soul Stirrers were one of the first to adopt this dramatic technique.

With Harris's unmistakably clear and piercing falsetto at the helm, the Soul Stirrers became a professional touring group traversing all forty-eight states. By so doing they developed a network of contacts to arrange bookings. Multiple bookings kept the group constantly on the road. Once they had played a particular town or place, it was a sure thing they would be asked back. In addition to church venues they branched out into playing at high schools and concert auditoriums. The Soul Stirrers gradually switched from using inexperienced ministers to professional bookers. This led to a shift of base from Houston to Chicago in 1937. Once headquartered in the

Windy City, the Soul Stirrers could drive out to black urban centers such as Detroit, Cleveland, Cincinnati and St. Louis on long weekend trips.

Chicago had a long established gospel quartet tradition. This did not stop the Soul Stirrers from conquering them all in "quartet battles." In 1943, billed as the Five Soul Stirrers, they began recording for Bronze Records, a black-owned company run by Le Roy Hurte in Los Angeles. Six known sides have survived, including their first effort, "I'll never turn back," which was re-recorded for Aladdin in February of 1947.

Four other Bronze charts were reissued by Night Train in 1995. W & W, Downbeat and, much later Folk Lyric Records, leased or reissued some of this material including Dorsey's definitive "Precious Lord" and "Walk around" (my bedside, Lord) for which Harris, the author of the song, attaches a folksy story of how during an influenza epidemic, child Rebert was walked around the bedside of a dying classmate by his mother. Harris had a tendency to over-color significant parts of his life.

Chicago was the home of black pioneer deejay Jack L. Cooper. From the early 1930s through the 1950s Cooper and his wife Gertrude played and promoted black music over the airwaves. Cooper, an ex-welterweight boxer, presented The All-Colored Hour over WSBC AM. But it was the Soul Stirrers who were the first to enjoy a regular, ongoing weekly program in 1940 over WIND. Through the radio medium they promoted large package programs at Wendell Phillips and Du Sable black high schools. During the War years the Soul Stirrers got a chance to sing on USO shows and, to cap things off, for Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill on the White House lawn.

In 1945, billed as the Five Gospel Stirrers, with Heywood "James" Medlock replacing Moxel L. Franklin, they recorded six known sides for Ivin Ballin's Philadelphia-based Gotham and their Twentieth Century subsidiary label. Leased sides appeared on J. Mayo Williams' Ebony / Harlem disceries. Two of the Gotham tunes, "Well well" (don't worry about me) and "His eye is on the sparrow," were given a makeover for Aladdin in 1946 and 1947.

During the 1940s the Chicago-based (Sallie) Martin and (Kenneth) Morris publishing company supplied a constant flow of new song material for the group to use. In 1949 Martin & Morris published the Soul Stirrers Gospel Songbooks numbers 11 and 15 which the firm continues to keep in print. Soul Stirrers gems such as "Jesus prayed for you and I," "Steal away," "Well well," "I want to rest, Lord, rest," "Glory glory Hallelujah," "One day," and "One of these days" were included.

Sponsored by the black newspaper, The Chicago Defender, Harris, in his absence, was elected Mayor of Bronzeville (one of Chicago's black neighborhoods) in 1945. He served in this honorary capacity for two years but rarely found time to help the folks in the community. Around this time the group ventured into the cleaning and pressing business on Forty-seventh and Prairie. It was not an uncommon thing for nationally known gospel groups to run entrepreneurial enterprises. Mahalia Jackson started it, and the Fairfield Four tried it without much success.

During the cleaning and pressing venture, Willie Claude Eason, a.k.a. "Little Willie & His Talking Guitar," used to hang out on the sidewalks in the vicinity. Willie made a fortune as a street musician, much to the envy of the Soul Stirrers who had to run a small business to scrape by as musicians. Eason made as much as fifty to seventy-five dollars on each corner he sat with his maroon velvet-lined guitar case

thrown open to receive gratuities until police moved him on. He would move from corner to corner, city to city (in fancy cars) singing on the streets and making a fortune.

Medlock was often left to mind the store and on occasion Eason would ask to have his amp chord plugged in through the back near the steamer machines. Eason and the Soul Stirrers became close friends. The cleaning and pressing premises also served as rehearsal hall, ticket sales and booking office for several years before the group, unable to manage things properly, sold out.

By the time the Soul Stirrers signed with Aladdin Records during the spring of 1946, a solid lineup of soldiers had been put in place: Harris, Crain, Medlock, Brewster, Robinson and Farley, the unconquerable. The Soul Stirrers was the first gospel quartet signed to Aladdin shortly after its founding.

The Soul Stirrers' first session yielded the beautifully conceived Negro spirituals "Steal away" and "Remember me". The second session rewarded us with what strikes me as the best ever waxing of C.D. Martin's "His eye is on the sparrow" plus the hypnotically uplifting "One day" from the Martin & Morris songbook.

The February 1947 session gave us the traditional "Ride on King Jesus" with Harris's delicious falsetto riding over the tight harmonies and "Some day," given as much bravado and charm. "Well well" from the February 1947 sessions date is of significant artistry and should have pleased its authors Martin & Morris when it sold in promising numbers during the fall of 1950.

This is where Willie Claude Eason stepped into the picture. He was born in 1921 in La Crosse, Schley County, Georgia. Willie's brother, Truman, took lessons in steel guitar from a Hawaiian teacher during the 1930s. Willie was impressed. Taking a few pointers from his brother, Willie learned the legato slanted bar technique which allowed a slurring vocal-like sound on the instrument. During the late 1930s Willie took his talking music into the Keith Dominion of The House of God Church.

Willie toured with Bishop Lockley's musical ensemble and ended up in New York performing in street corner ministries. In June 1946 he was noticed by King Records who issued eight sides on Willie for their Queen subsidiary. Also on these recordings were his brother's son who served as second vocalist and guitarist and Roosevelt Eberhart. On June 2, 1947 Eason, backgrounded by the Soul Stirrers, cut two two-part political songs with Eason recitations. When President Franklin D. Roosevelt (a man remembered as an advocate for a square deal for all) died of a cerebral hemorrhage in April 1945, a number of black performers cut shellac tributes. In April 1946 Otis Jackson & The Evangelist Singers of Detroit recorded "Tell me why you like Roosevelt" (Parts 1 & 2) for Ben Bart's Hub Records. The record, with its rapidly spoken narrative and chant, became a popular success around Chicago.

Eason took the narrative and with one or two minor embellishments retitled it "Why I like Roosevelt" (Parts 1 & 2). The Eason / Soul Stirrers recording of it was issued during the spring of 1948 when the United States was more concerned with the communist menace and the Berlin blockade than any thoughts about justice for all in its own back yard. The Golden Gate quartet had cut successful recordings on Okeh Records in support of the U.S. war effort five years earlier. Perhaps Aladdin thought they could be equally fortunate. A second try was made with the release of "Pearl Harbor" (Parts 1 & 2) during the summer of 1949 when Tokyo Rose, the infamous Japanese wartime broadcaster, was in the process of being tried and sentenced for



treason. One must remember that gospel music was exerting an ever-increasing influence on the sound of black secular music at this time and dealing with political issues seemed like a good way to cross over.

By November 1947 the Soul Stirrers were back recording as themselves with glorious waxings of “All alone” and “Blessed quietness” that would have made the latter’s writer, Manie P. Ferguson, beam with joy. The May 1947 session yielded the awesomely lovely “This is my prayer,” a lilting, hypnotic ballad that had the power to make archangels weep. Johnson Oatman Jnr’s “Lift Him up” was almost transformed into a lullaby.

The December 1948 date rendered us a touching funereal reading of the traditional “End of my journey” plus what this writer considers the most endearing Soul Stirrers’ record, “Does Jesus care” which never fails to lift my spirits whenever I am down to the ground. Unlike Frank E. Graeff’s Baptist hymn of the same name, the Harris-warbled song can almost be said to be solely his own. You could just listen to his lead and forget that the harmonies are in there. Harris takes the song so completely to himself.



This is the photograph that is on the program on the bottom of the preceding page. Made in 1946, (l.-r.) R. H. Harris, James Hayward Medlock. Standing under Harris and Medlock is R. B. Robinson and S. R. Crain. Sitting is J. J. Farley and T. L. Brewster.

Other treasures include Martin & Morris’s “Glory, glory Hallelujah” and the up-to-now extremely hard to find “Silent night,” rivaled only by the Harmonizing Four’s version on Gotham from 1951. It seems a shame that Aladdin, a company trying to establish itself in the gospel and R & B market, failed to invest enough money in the promotion of its first class gospel talent. This was a failing that eventually lead to the Soul Stirrers’ departure for an organization that would get behind them (Specialty.) Yet again, if the Soul Stirrers had been fortunate enough to get with a company with a large promotional

budget like Decca or Mercury, for instance, would the Soul Stirrers have had the artistic freedom to make the kind of recordings they felt worked best for them? When the Soul Stirrers quit Aladdin in 1949, Heywood "James" Medlock was replaced by Paul Foster Sr. Foster had sung in Oakland's legendary Famous Rising Star Gospel Singers alongside the unheralded, sweet tenor Tommy Jenkins who had a profound influence on the formative singing style of Sam Cooke. Cooke replaced Harris in the Soul Stirrers one year after Harris signed with Specialty Records in 1950. Harris and Medlock went on to sing with The Christland Singers of Chicago. Medlock returned to the group for the latter part of 1950 to share lead chores with Paul Foster.

Sam Cooke's induction into the Soul Stirrers in late 1950 turned gospel quartet on its head. Gospel was becoming a type of music enjoyed by those outside the church. Sam Cooke created a wide appeal. Black folk of all ages paid more attention to the music, and the Soul Stirrers, quite happy to get their message across to a more diverse kind of audience, became the statesmen for a new soul music which inspired a list of singers so long we would not have time to mention them all.

■ Opal Louis Nations  
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