SPIRIT OF MEMPHIS

HAPPY IN THE SERVICE OF THE LORD

There is no doubt the Spirit of Memphis were one of the leading and certainly most influential church-wrecking quartets of the late 1940s and 1950s. Their forte was a solid "front line" of shared-lead singers who blended a soothing, satisfying and sanctified approach. Firstly, lead tenor Willmer M. "Little Axe" Broadnax, born December 29, 1916 in Houston, Texas. "Little Axe" possessed a clear, peerless, almost operatic, tenor which he used with boisterous effect. Secondly, tenor/baritone lead Jethro "Jet" Bledsoe Sr., born May 5th, 1917 in Arlington, Tennessee. "Jet" nursed, teased and caressed his listeners in a smooth, soulful, rarely unrestrained singing style. Then there was lead baritone Silas Earle Steele Jr., born March 29th, 1911 in Brighton, Alabama. Silas, veteran of the Famous Blue Jay Singers of Birmingham, Alabama and the Bright Stars, shook the rafters of the church with his bellowing, thunderous baritone which often broke into preacherly narrative mid-song. Silas brought knowledge and experience to the group.

The voices of these three principals were often offset by James Darling's clever baritone counterpoint which he used as a means of melodic improvisation. Baritone James D. Willis, a.k.a. James Darling, was born January 30th, 1907 in Tunica, Mississippi. This leaves the fine basso of Earl D. Malone, born July 21st in Happys, Arkansas. Earl's awesome; often prominent, pumping bass drove the group. Many an aspiring basso doo-wopper has lifted this man's licks for themselves. Last but not least we have tenor stalwart Robert Reed who joined the group in 1934. Robert J. Reed was born March 10th, 1917 in Memphis, Tennessee.

Two more soldiers lent their services to the group during their studio tenure with King / De Luxe Records (1949-52), the focus of this CD collection. These were baritone Fred Howard who came aboard in 1951 and basso James Keels from the Trumpeteers of Baltimore, Maryland who stayed only long enough to appear on the December 1950 session in place of the indisposed Earl Malone. Fred Howard was born in Holly Springs, Mississippi on September 19th, 1925.

The outfit's humble beginnings date back to 1927-28. James Darling in a telephone interview with Kip Lornell in 1980 stated that the group came together during the early days of the depression when James along with Burt Perkins, Arthur Wright and Arthur White got together to sing at a house at Looney and Second Streets in Memphis. They came up with the name T.M. & S. Quartet. The sobriquet reflected the initials of the three churches the group members attended. These were The Tree of Life, Mount Olive and St. Matthew's Baptist churches.

David Evans in his 1997 liner notes to the Spirit of Memphis album "Travelling On" states that the original members included Arthur Wright, A.C. Harris, Forrest Terrell and James Darling. Evans goes on to assert that they were soon joined by James Peoples, Luther McGill and Robert White. With various singers passing in and out of a group at its formative stage, remembering who was present at the start is a matter of undocumented memory.

Back to Kip Lornell's telephone interview. In 1930, during a quartet meeting at Burt Perkins' house, James Darling, who was in search of a more provocative moniker, presented a pocket handkerchief which had The Spirit of St. Louis embroidered on one corner. The item was a memento celebrating Charles Lindbergh's 1927 flight across the Atlantic in his craft, The Spirit of St. Louis. The name presented a certain worldliness, one which lent itself to a degree of professionalism the group members hoped to attain.

Gospel singing groups were gradually coming into their own at this time, and under the freshly adopted Spirit of Memphis Quartet billing, the group found themselves competing against the merits of the Orange Mound Harmonizers, Gospel Writers and other local unrecorded aggregations. A little later they formed a junior outfit from which to draw talent when singers dropped out of the senior group. This squad was called the Spirit of Memphis Juniors. The members sang acappella and stuck with traditional material. During the 1930s they battled the Middle Baptist Quartet, Memphis's most formidable group.

By 1937-38, the group had evolved into a unit including James Darling, Mose Hill, Elijah Jones (who also served as trainer for the boys as well as the extremely competitive Gospel

Writers) and lead tenor James Harvey whose striking reputation is remembered by few today. Other singers flitted in and out of the quartet at this time. These included reputable voice coach Gus Miller, plus Horace Fisher, James Strong and Sam Miller.

By 1939 the line-up included Freddie Johnson, Ramond Sanders, Herman Paul, Lewis White, Robert Reed, Earl Malone and Jethro Bledsoe. Concerts were usually held on Saturday evenings and Sunday afternoons with the charge of ten or fifteen cents admission to defray travel expenses. Weekend trips were made to play out of town. Groups like the Famous Blue Jay Singers were brought in by group manager and booker James Darling to draw heavier attendance. Touring group concert stops were usually held at The Auditorium on Main Street for the price of a dollar. Influential road groups like the Soul Stirrers and Golden Gate Quartet had an enormous impact on the local scene whose singers began writing their own material.

In performance local outfits became more animated and less "flat footed." David Evans points out that on occasion the Spirit of Memphis ventured out as far as Louisville, Birmingham and New Orleans to perform. They broadcast live radio shows over WHBQ, WMPS, WMC and WNRB. Sponsors included The Littlejohn Taxi Company and Pete's Men's Shop. They also worked for Wallace Johnson of the Holiday Inns chain as singing salesmen to sell homes. Standing on truck-beds, the Spirit of Memphis sang and extolled the virtues of home ownership.

By 1941 the Memphis gospel quartet scene had reached a raised degree of professionalism. Gas rationing kept most of the spiritual groups on home turf during the war years, but not the Spirit of Memphis who would travel on gospel caravans with headliners like the Fairfield Four, Golden Gate Quartet and Jubalaires.

By 1947 the group had become fully professional. A year later an almost unbeatable line-up was put together out of Malone, Bledsoe, Darling and Reed plus two newcomers, the awesome, sanctified pipes of tenor Robert Crenshaw (who shortly thereafter found even greater glory with the Five Blind Boys of Alabama and Swan Silvertones) and Brother Theo "Bless my bones" Wade, born April 30th, 1906 in Palestine, Arkansas. Theo had sung in the Mount Olive Wonders in the late 1920s and had initially joined the Spirit of Memphis as manager, booking agent and inspirational organizer for the group.

That same year, 1948, Theo cornered a staff job at WDIA where he started out with a thirty-minute spot. An on-air joke has it that the Spirit of Memphis only kept Theo on because he had a big enough car. In reality, Theo really put the Spirit of Memphis on the map. His WDIA gospel program, "Hallelujah Jubilee," started in 1949. The show ran seven to nine on weekdays and Saturday nights and became increasingly popular during the 1950s. In early 1949, the group was noticed by T. Wesley Puckett at a concert in Birmingham, Alabama. Puckett produced a record on the group, label copied as the Memphis Gospel Singers, for his newly founded Hallelujah Spirituals label based in Birmingham. The two songs, cut at radio station WJLD were Faye Ernestine Brown's "Happy in the service of the Lord" and "How many times." More charts were cut at the sessions.

The entire commitment via De Luxe ended up in the hands of King Records mogul Syd Nathan who controlled the rights to the De Luxe label once owned by the Braun Bros., in New Jersey. During the spring of 1949 Nathan issued a second version on De Luxe of "(I'm) happy in he service of the Lord" with the group still going by the name Memphis Gospel Singers. "My life is in His hands" was chosen for the underside. Although the record sold well, Syd Nathan, who cared little for black quartet at the time, failed to issue a follow-up.

Meanwhile, Theo got the group into the WDIA Memphis studios and cut a series of transcriptions from live radio broadcasts. Why these recordings were not made commercially available until they turned up in 1990 on a Swedish Gospel Jubilee album collection is a mystery (Gospel Jubilee RF 1404.) Little Axe, who had recently joined the group in place of Crenshaw, really wails on a solid reading of "Mother gone on." The "all star" line-up of

Reed, Bledsoe, Steele, Darling, Malone and Broadnax was, by late 1949, firmly set in place.

Shortly before Christmas 1949, the Spirit of Memphis, now signed exclusively to King Records, cut the first of six sessions in Cincinnati, the results of which included a bass-driven workout of "He never left me alone," a beautifully blended "Blessed are the dead," "The day is passed and gone," the first gospel waxing to include a sermon, and the mournfully wailed "Jesus, Jesus." By this time the Spirit of Memphis had become one of the highest paid quartets in the professional ranks, commanding as much as $200 each week. Breaking from tradition, Memphis-based quartets took on the gospel compositions of Memphis song writers such as those of Rev. W. Herbert Brewster and Lucie E. Campbell. To counter the gloom of the Cold War, quartets started going out in brightly colored suits, developed fancy choreography and created programs that highlighted quartet competition to fill seats. Tonality became the key to success.

On a program fixed for Sunday afternoon, December 4, 1950 at Chicago's Du Sable High, a roster including the Spirit of Memphis, Pilgrim Travelers and Soul Stirrers devastated the school gymnasium crowd. Taking the sale of advance tickets into their own hands, the Soul Stirrers alone sold 1,500 tickets for a dollar a pop.

Two King sessions were fulfilled in 1950. The first took place on May 10 and produced the triumphant harmonies of Brewster's "How far am I from Canaan," the soulfully conveyed "Calvary" and the incomparable "I'll never forget." The December 9th date rendered the picturesque "Automobile to glory" (with James Keels sitting in for Earl Malone) plus the joy-filled, mesmerizing harmonies of "I'll go." The Southern Wonders and Sunset Travelers topped by the Pet-Milk-sponsored Spirit of Memphis were fast becoming the major male movers and shakers in Tennessee. The Songbirds of the South reigned supreme on the distaff side. All, except the Sunset Travelers, enjoyed regular programming over WDIA. WDIA sponsored an annual Good Will Revue, a benefit to raise funds to help people in poor communities throughout the Mid South. The Spirit of Memphis were regularly slated to appear.

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In June 1952 WDIA's daily radio format began to include live broadcasts during the morning hours sponsored by Gold Medal Flour. The Spirit of Memphis regularly filled the 10:00 to 10:15 a.m. slot. Such live presentations continued well into the 1950s. The station also sponsored the "Hallelujah Jubilee Caravan." Stellar groups like the Spirit of Memphis were bused down to Mississippi or up to Tennessee to perform at a hall or auditorium. Theo served as m.c. and WDIA would lease the bus and pay for barbecue box lunches.

The group's final King session was set for July 10th, 1952. Six titles were conveyed to tape. These included the infectious "Jesus brought me" and the spirit-moving "Just to behold His face" which touches the soul with its sympathetic narrative. On October 7th, 1952, the Spirit of Memphis were committed to tape at the 7,000 seat Mason's Temple in Memphis. Shortly before Christmas that same year King Records issued the live "Lord Jesus" in two parts. King Records again took a gamble by issuing not a gospel song as such by a quartet known for its vocal dynamics but a live sermon supported by little except the old church moan. But Syd Nathan needed not to have worried as the release caught notice and sold well in gospel markets nationwide.

Demand for the Spirit of Memphis recordings brought additional work which interfered with their radio commitments. They often had to cancel conflicting radio programs in favour of well-paying gigs. Despite the money coming in from heavy touring schedules, the group was unhappy with the way Syd Nathan was looking after their financial interests. He paid a modest up-front lump sum before a session, but that was all. The King

releases sold well, and the group was aware of Nathan's financial shortcomings.

Kip Lornell demonstrates that the group travelled extensively. A typical summer tour would take them north to Detroit, east to Buffalo, south through Washington and Cincinnati and back to Memphis momentarily before heading south to New Orleans and back home via Mobile. A tour west would take the group south, then west, through Texas, Arizona and California. In early 1953 the Spirit of Memphis switched to Don Robey's Duke / Peacock label in Houston. The group surmised that Robey's more aggressive promotion style would bring them greater prosperity. Whatever that may have been, the outfit's King sides remain their most enduring and certainly most sought-after recordings.

James Darling, founder and originator of the Spirit of Memphis, passed away on April 12th, 1985 at his home in Riverside, California. Earl "the great pumper" D. Malone was taken from us in Memphis during July 1987. The formidable "Little Axe," who was in fact a man living as a woman, died on June 1st, 1992 in Philadelphia. The two remaining, Jethro Bledsoe Snr and Robert J. Reed, journeyed on until 1993. "Jet" died in Memphis on February 24th and Robert departed this earth (also in Memphis) on November 22nd.

Just a few months ago the ongoing Spirit of Memphis lead by Melvin Mosley cut a live vanity CD recording in Michigan (SOM 1427.) Currently available through Melvin, the collection offers fine and exciting retreads of "You better run," "I John saw" and "On the battlefield" plus a number of other equally fired-up familiar gospels. The set is supported by a tough, solid rhythm section that does not once detract from the old, well-known recreated harmonies.

--- Opal Louis Nations January 2005

Principal acknowledgements
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DISC ONE

Robert Reed (tenor); Jethroe Bledsoe, Silas Steele, James Darling (baritones); Earl Malone (bass) Birmingham Alabama, c. early 1949

1. I'M HAPPY IN THE SERVICE OF THE LORD DELUXE 3221 (Broadnax)
2. MY LIFE IS IN HIS HANDS (Carroll-Joyner-Owens)
3. HAPPY IN THE SERVICE OF THE LORD HALLELUJAH SPIRITUALS TWXI (Broadnax)
4. HOW MANY TIMES (Dorsey)

Willmer M. Broadnax (tenor); Robert Reed (tenor); Jethroe Bledsoe, Silas Steele, James Darling (baritones); Earl Malone (bass) Cincinnati December 12th 1949

5. ON THE BATTLEFIELD KING 4358 (Malone)
6. THE DAY IS PASSED AND GONE KING 4340 (Malone)
7. HE NEVER LEFT ME ALONE KING 4371 (Malone)
8. BLESSED ARE THE DEAD KING 4340 (Malone)
9. IF JESUS HAD TO PRAY KING 4371 (Malone)
10. JESUS, JESUS KING 4358 (Bernard-Singer-Steele)

As above Cincinnati May 10th 1950

11. I'LL NEVER FORGET KING 4407 (Cleveland)
12. CALVARY KING 4392 (Corbin)
13. HOW FAR AM I FROM CANAAN KING 4407 (Jeter)
14. MAKE MORE ROOM FOR JESUS KING 4392 (Brewster)

As above except James Keele (bass) replaces Earl Malone Cincinnati December 9th 1950

15. AUTOMOBILE TO GLORY KING 4429
16. IF YOU MAKE A START TO HEAVEN (DON'T TURN AROUND) KING 4440
17. GOD'S GOT HIS EYES ON YOU KING 4440
18. I'LL GO KING 4429 (Wells)

As above except Earl Malone (bass) replaces James Keele Cincinnati May 5th 1951

19. EVERY DAY AND EVERY HOUR KING 4463 (Walker)
20. EVERYTIME I FEEL THE SPIRIT KING 4471 (Jackson)

21. WORLD PRAYER
KING 4463 (Malone)
22. SIGN OF THE JUDGEMENT
KING 4471 (Malone)

Willmer M. Broadnax (tenor); Robert Reed (tenor); Jethroe Bledsoe, Silas Steele, Fred Howard (baritones); Earl Malone (bass) Cincinnati August 14th 1951
23. THAT AWFUL DAY
KING 4538 (Watts-arr Malone)
24. TELL HEAVEN I'M COMING
KING 4500 (Malone-Wade)

DISC TWO

Willmer M. Broadnax (tenor); Robert Reed (tenor); Jethroe Bledsoe, Silas Steele, Fred Howard (baritones); Earl Malone (bass) Cincinnati August 14th 1951
1. EASE MY TROUBLED MIND
KING 4538 (Roberts)
2. HE NEVER LET GO MY HAND
KING 4521 (Reed)
3. THE TEN COMMANDMENTS
KING 4500 (Alexander)
4. THE ATOMIC TELEPHONE
KING 4521 (Nathan-Glover-Smith)

Willmer M. Broadnax (tenor); Robert Reed (tenor); Jethroe Bledsoe, Silas Steele, Fred Howard (baritones) ; Earl Malone (bass) Cincinnati August 10th 1952
5. TOLL THE BELL EASY
KING 4574 (Malone)
6. JESUS BROUGHT ME
KING 4562 (Malone)
7. THERE'S NO SORROW
KING 4614 (Malone)
8. WORKING TILL THE DAY IS DONE
KING 4614
9. GOD'S AMAZING GRACE
KING 4575
10. JUST TO BEHOLD HIS FACE
KING 4562 (Campbell)

Willmer M. Broadnax (tenor); Robert Reed (tenor); Jethroe Bledsoe, Silas Steele, Fred Howard (baritones) ; Earl Malone (bass) Live concert, Mason's Temple, Memphis, October 7th 1952
11. LORD JESUS KING 4576 (Carr)

Willmer M. Broadnax (tenor); Robert Reed (tenor); Jethroe Bledsoe, Silas Steele, Fred Howard (baritones); Earl Malone (bass) Memphis c. January 1953
12. GOD SAVE AMERICA
PEACOCK 1710 (Malone)
13. SURELY SURELY AMEN
(Bledsoe- Wade)

As above c. February 1953
14. I WILL TRUST IN THE LORD
PEACOCK 1717 (Franklin)
15. SINCE JESUS CAME INTO MY HEART
(Myles)

Willmer M. Broadnax (tenor); Robert Reed (tenor); Jethroe Bledsoe, Silas Steele, Fred Howard (baritones); Earl Malone (bass) Memphis c. January 1954 except *March 1954
16. HE'S A FRIEND OF MINE
PEACOCK 1730 (Allen-Williams)
17. WHEN MOTHERS GONE*
(Broadnax)
18. SWEET HOUR OF PRAYER
PEACOCK 1734 (Trad)

As above c. February 1954
19. WHAT COULD I DO
PEACOCK 1734 (Brewer)

As above, Houston late 1954
20. HOME IN THE SKY
PEACOCK 1746 (Lauderdale)
21. STANDING BY THE BEDSIDE
(Lauderdale)
22. HE'LL NEVER LET ME FALL
PEACOCK 1754 (Meek)

As above March 1954
23. I'LL TELL IT
PEACOCK 1754 (Jeter)