THE SWAN SILVERTONES

1946 - 1951

The beginnings of the Silvertone a.k.a. Swan Silvertone Singers starts with the legendary high tenor/falsetto master Rev. Claude Jeter who in turn influenced so many singers, notably Ted Taylor, Donnie Elbert and the elegantly melodic David Ruffin, just to name a few. His sweeping cadenzas and spellbinding mellismas captured the hearts and souls of church folk for over half a century.

Claudis Augusta Jeter was born on October 26, 1914 at Hope Hill in Montgomery, Alabama. The one-hundred-year-old Bryant Chapel was, and still is, the Jeter family church. The Jeter clan moved to Kentucky in 1921 after the early demise of their father. Claude was blessed with one sister, Dorothy, who possessed a voice so outstanding many thought it surpassed that of Claude's in distinction. Being withdrawn by nature, Dorothy never used her gift professionally. Claude had four brothers: Jim, Willie, Melvyn and John. At one time, the Jeter siblings formed a little singing group, but their singing rarely reached beyond the confines of the Jeter living room.

Claude's mother, Machie, sometimes mispronounced Maggie, had a reputation for being a singer of note. Claude's father, Will, was a lawyer who held a professional position for a Tennessee Coal and Iron Railroad. Claude's first musical influences came from his mother but on the radio Claude was also exposed to all the great Birmingham-based quartets of the day. He got fired up when he heard the Norfolk Jubilees and the Mills Brothers, but his major sources of radio-beamed inspiration were the Golden Gate Quartet and the Charioteers, a.k.a. the Dixie Songsters.

It was Billy Williams and the Charioteers who most impressed him. More accurately, it was Billy's ethereal high tenor with its breathtaking leaps into the upper stratosphere that Claude tried to emulate in his own

fashion. In his teens Claude worked the mines of Kentucky and in Coalwood and Carratha in West Virginia. The echo-filled chambers of the mines were just the place to perfect close harmonies and Claude wasted no time forming a singing quartet out of his brother Melvyn and two buddies. The Golden Gate Quartet inspired many sound-alikes and the youthful miners were no exception. Claude sang baritone. Disenchanted with his natural voice and disappointed with being unable to reach certain notes, Claude switched to "head voice" or lyric tenor remembering his fondness for the skills of Billy Williams. As he worked on his falsetto he found he could not only reach the top notes he was seeking but do it in such a way as to reflect his innermost soul.

At one point the quartet, calling itself the Silvertones, went out to sing on weekends. The Silvertones evolved into the Four Harmony Kings with Alabaman baritone John Myles, Leroy Watkins and Eddie Boroughas. Rehearsals shifted above ground where they were plentiful enough to show significant improvement. Their reputation spread. Claude caught the notice of the Dixie Hummingbirds who were touring the mining camps. Having heard Claude's awesome pipes, the Birds hired him to sing bass on a two-week tour. Claude was taken on as last-minute temporary substitute for basso Jimmy Bryant who James Davis had fired out on the road.

By 1942, the good fortunes of the Four Harmony Kings were such that they could quit mining and move to Knoxville, Tennessee where they found plenty of singing jobs. The outfit at this point was made up of Claude, John Myers, Willie Johnson (not to be confused with the "Gates" lead) and Charles Kelly. "White folks used too have parties," said Claude, "and other entertainments. They would call me and we would go there and play the big houses, three rooms and a hallway packed with people." The Four Harmony Kings would sing old folk songs like "Carry me back to Old Virginny." If they did not know the words they would fake them.

The quartet worked its way up to four or five hundred dollar engagements at white fraternal and business group gatherings. No blacks around meant that the group never had to fear losing their church following. They sang comical songs, old spirituals and Golden Gate secular tunes like "Sweet Lorraine." It did not take long before they were broadcasting over Knoxville's powerful 50,000 watt WDIB. After three fifteen-minute shows, their program was bought by The Swan Bakery who promised to put them on the air for fifteen minutes five days a week. The only catch was they had to change names to the Swan Silvertones to make it seem the group were more like the company's promotional representatives, not that anyone would confuse them with the Harmony Kings of Orangeburg, S.C.

To enable the group to travel to programs on extended weekends, they pre-recorded up to five programs as was common procedure for groups during this time. Adding more members to the group they were able to compete with those who performed with more fire and gusto. This also allowed a tired soloist to "sit out" while a fresh one took his place. Additional soldiers included Bobby Womack's uncle, the hard-singing Solomon Womack, Roosevelt Payne and basso Henry Bossard. Both Womack and Bossard sang with the Famous Blue Jay Singers in Chicago.

Five years into their six-year WDIB tenure, the group decided to cut a test pressing of "Swing low" backed with "I want to rest." The fact is, it is only assumed that the WDIB group is the same as on the demo as so few hard facts are known about this one-time pressing.

Claude tells the story of how the group first travelled from Kentucky to Cincinnati which must have been some while before they first recorded there. "Me, baritone singer John Myles, a tenor by the name of Tommy and baser Leroy Watkins got into one car. We left Splint, Kentucky, driving to Cincinnati. We turned the radio on and heard Sidney Nathan." (Claude probably caught Nathan as a guest on a country music station, such as WLW or WCKY where, putting himself in touch with country music talent, he had a chance to make contact and perhaps sign a few to his fledgling label.) Claude describes Nathan as the best man he ever sung for, yet he criticized him for only wanting "hillbilly style gospel" and described him as a man who did not care too much for "real gospel."

We know that the Swans' first session took place in Cincinnati during July of 1946. In all probability old buddy J.C. Ginyard (who himself recorded for Nathan in March 1946 with the Dixieaires) recommended the Swans to him. The Dixieaires were possibly the first gospel/blues & rhythm quartet to record for Nathan. By this point, the Swan's Silvertone Singers (as they were label-copied) included Claude Jeter and Albert Reed, tenors, Solomon Womack and John Myles, baritones, and William Johnson, bass and guitar. A total of eight songs ended up in release. These included Claude's early falsetto phrasings on "I want my crown" and in solo flight on "Go ahead."

The group stayed pretty much in the Jubilee mold. Signs of the quartet evolving into a looser, more uninhibited mode made themselves evident on the important second session of December 1947 where tenor Roosevelt Payne had replaced Albert Reed and basso Henry Bossard had returned and taken William Johnson's seat. Henry Bossard was born on September 4, 1918 in Cleveland, Ohio. A more dramatic, sanctified sound is heard on "I'll search heaven," "I want to dig a little deeper" and "Working on the building."

It is quite clear that Solomon Womack was given license to create a harder, more progressive Swans sound. During 1947, according to Claude, the group went directly to Mr. Swan to ask if they could spend a longer time touring, as they had received letters at WDIB from ministers across the country who wanted them to come out and sing at their churches. The group's first tour throughout the Southern states created many bookings along the way. Their initial visit to California came about in 1948. The group toured pretty much for eighteen months, during which time they mailed radio shows to Knoxville but stayed out of recording studios. After all, they made far more money on the gospel circuit than they did from royalties cutting sides.

Claude tells of an interesting incident which to my calculation may have taken place at the group's third session in Cincinnati on June 13, 1949. "We got to the studio," says Claude, "and we had nobody to play guitar for us." In the studio we met this blues singer and guitarist, Lonnie Johnson, and it so happened that he played and sang for us a tune we sung, and in the same arrangement. Syd Nathan liked what he heard and put us together."

At least five songs were cut at that time, including Solomon Womack's driving "I got a mother done gone on," Claude's ethereal "I'm gonna wait" and the harmonically complex "My God's getting us ready" The Swans toured for a year during which time the Swan's Silvertone Quintet became the Swan Silvertone Sextet with the addition of Rev. Percell Perkins, born February 6, 1917 in Duncan, Mississippi. Perkins, who had sung in many

quartets before joining the legendary Five Blind Boys of Missippii in 1947 and who after singing in the Swans went on to sing and preach in the Five Blind Boys of Alabama in 1957, was brought in to "harden" even more the group's increasingly revivalist tendencies.

On the June 1950 session, Percell Perkins leads on the plea song "Jesus never fails," The Maker likened to the finality of nuclear war on "Jesus is God's atomic bomb" and the mother-song "Mother's name lives in my heart." Percell Perkins' second of three sessions with the Swans came about in December 1950. With Solomon Womack as a foil, Perkins truly scorches the church on "I got a witness" and "Live so God can use you." At the close of the group's tenure with WDIB, they switched bases and pitched up in Pittsburgh where for two years they continued to conduct radio broadcasts.

In May 1951 the Swans recorded at the Beltone studios in New York. Although the same pattern of close harmonies as had always marked the Swans sound was still utilized, at this point a heightened sanctification was reached by pitting the smooth tones of Claude Jeter against the roughness of Percell Perkins. Examples include the beautiful "Another's cry," and "Toll the bell." The classic Swan Silvertones sound had at last come into full flower. Unfortunately, this first golden line-up was not to last as Percell Perkins suffered ill health and had to be replaced by the firebrand preacher Rev. Robert Crenshaw who lead the group into the 1952 Specialty sessions.

A word here ought to be said about John Myles whose rich baritone helped to fill out the backgrounds of the Swans' signature harmonies for more than three decades. Claude quit the Swans to head up his own ministry in the late 1960s when the group was with Hob Records. (He was ordained in 1963.) He elected John Myles to "carry" the group. Claude states that a Chicago girlfriend of John Myles poisoned him when she found out about a girlfriend back home in Montgomery, Alabama. He also asserts that later on the same woman poisoned Louis Johnson, a lead baritone with the Swans since 1959, the group having served a four-year tenure with Vee Jay Records.

Percell Perkins died on January 31, 2003 in Helena, Arkansas where he had settled and taken up his ministry. Henry Bossard passed on October 9, 2001 in Cleveland, Ohio. Solomon Womack died of circumstances surrounding a serious bout with pneumonia in the early 1950s. We know nothing of Roosevelt Payne's fate.

Rev. Claude Jeter lived for many years in a small Harlem apartment. He is now under constant medical supervision and wears a catheter due to a condition known as necrotic bladder. Although his sight and most of his hearing are gone, he does not have to take a confection of expensive drugs to keep him well. After he lost his balance and fell down the steps to his apartment he became unable to walk. This had condemned him to a wheelchair. But a constant stream of life-long fans and friends raise his spirits on an almost daily basis. Memories and good times flood his mind whenever he hears the Swans songs of yesteryear played to him.

Opal Louis Nations, November 2004

Principal sources of information are from taped interviews with Rev. Claude Jeter conducted by Spencer Jarrett of San Jose, California and Linwood Heath of Philadelphia

CD 1

Claude Jeter, Albert Reed (tenors); Solomon Womack, John Myles (baritones); William Johnson (bass) with William Johnson (guitar)
Cincinnati July 1946

1 I CRIED HOLY (Johnson) KING 4134
2 WILL THE CIRCLE BE UNBROKEN (trad arr Jeter) KING 4143
3 I DONE MADE IT UP IN MY MIND (Jeter) KING 4144
4 I'M TIRED (Jeter) KING 4144
5 MY TIME DONE COME (Jeter) KING 4143
6 I WANT MY CROWN (Ruth) KING 4137
7 THESE BONES GWINE RISE AGAIN (Jeter) KING 4137
8 GO AHEAD (Jeter) KING 4134

Claude Jeter, Roosevelt Payne (tenors); Solomon Womack, John Myles (baritones); Henry Bossard (bass)
Cincinnati December 1947

9 I WANT TO REST (Ruth) KING 4193
10 I'LL SEARCH HEAVEN (Jeter) KING 4282
11 IN THAT UPPER ROOM (Jeter) KING 4193
12 I WANT TO DIG A LITTLE DEEPER (Jeter) KING 4228
13 WORKING ON A BUILDING (Stanley) KING 4248
14 DOWN ON MY KNEES (Diamond) KING 4344
15 STANDING IN THE SAFETY ZONE (Ruth) KING LP 572
16 ALL ALONE (Harris) KING LP 575
17 I'VE TRIED (Roberson) KING 4282
18 WHAT COULD I DO (Bell-Watkins) KING 4282
19 I MUST TELL JESUS (Bradford) KING LP 575
20 DEPENDING ON JESUS (Bennet-Quincy KING 4248

As above June 13th 1949

21 NO, NOT A ONE (Womack) KING 4320
22 I GOT A MOTHER DONE GONE (Jeter) KING 4308
23 USE ME LORD (Jeter) KING 4320

CD 2

Claude Jeter, Roosevelt Payne (tenors); Solomon Womack, John Myles (baritones); Henry Bossard (bass) June 13th 1949

1 I'M GONNA WAIT (Jeter) KING 4308
2 MY GOD'S GETTING US READY (Jeter) KING 4344

Claude Jeter, Roosevelt Payne (tenors); Solomon Womack, Rev. Percell Perkins, John Myles (baritones); Henry Bossard (bass)
Cincinnati June 23rd 1950

3 JESUS NEVER FAILS (Perkins) KING 4404
4 JESUS IS GOD'S ATOMIC BOMB (Jeter) KING 4391
5 MOTHER'S NAME LIVED IN MY HEART (Jeter) KING 4404
6 LONG AGO (Myles KING 4391

As above Cincinnati December 2nd 1950

7 CARELESS SOUL (Jeter) KING 4430
8 I GOT A WITNESS (Womack) KING 4439
9 LIVE SO GOD CAN USE YOU (Nixon) KING 4439
10 MY LORD DONE WHAT HE SAID (Perkins) KING 4430

As above New York May 15th 1951

11 BACKSLIDER'S PLEA (Womack) KING 4494
12 A MOTHER'S CRY (Jeter) KING 4464
13 HE'S MY ALL (Jeter) KING 4512
14 ALL ABOARD KING 4516
15 ALL NIGHT ALL DAY (Jeter) KING 4464
16 TOLL THE BELL (Bossard) KING 4542
17 JESUS MET THE WOMAN AT THE WELL (Jeter) KING LP 578
18 OVER YONDER (Jeter) KING 4494
19 GRANT IT LORD (Perkins) KING 4542
20 I BELIEVE (Jeter) KING LP 578
21 EVERY DAY SEEMS LIKE SUNDAY (Jeter) KING 4512
22 FATHER ALONE (Perkins) KING 516