THE BEST OF THE SWANEE QUINTET

The Best of The Swanee Quintet

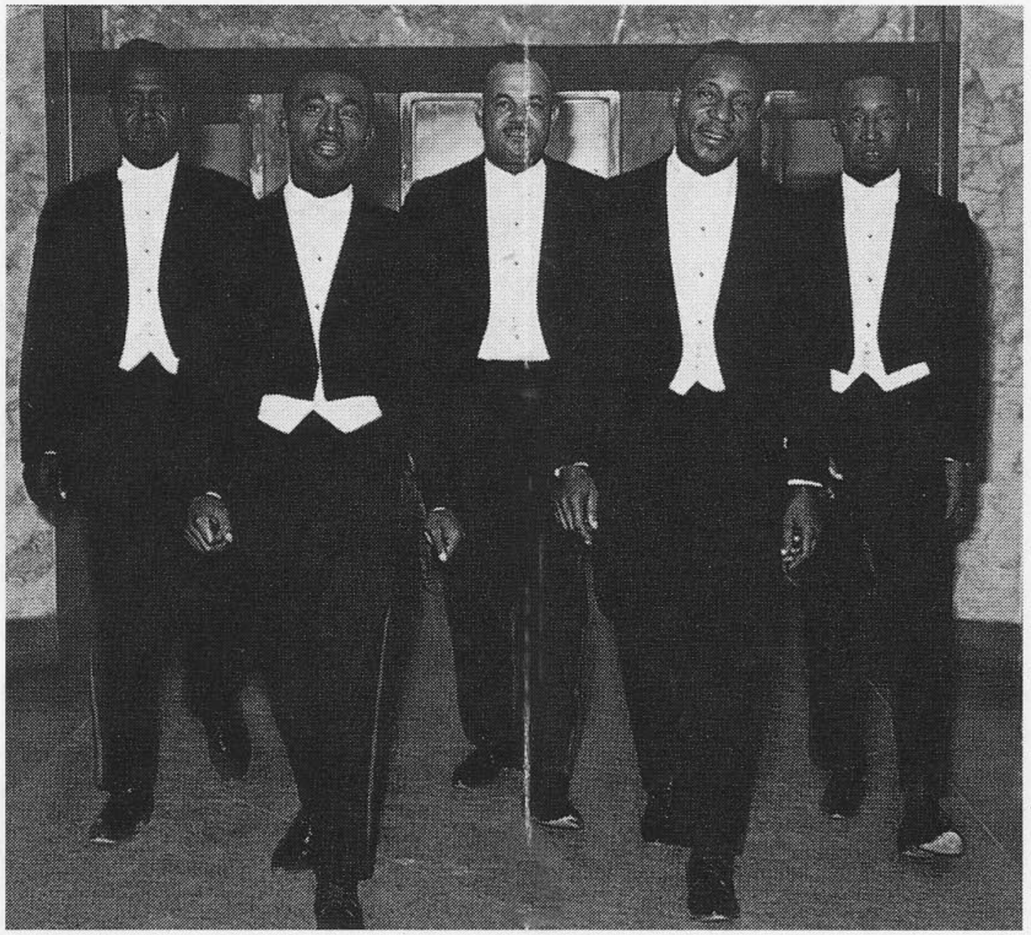
Back in 1975, Reverend Sharpton enlisted James Brown and The James Brown Show to play in support of The National Youth Movement in Madison Square Gardens in New York. The show featured many world-class performers. These included Tito Puente, Joe Bataan, and at the peak of their career, The Swanee Quintet. This was not the first time The Swanees shared billing with The James Brown roadshow. Back in 1966, James Brown included the group in his revue along with Bobby Byrd and Vicki Anderson at Harlem's famous Apollo Theater. Out of this, Brown with his band produced and recorded the group with the help of Bob Holmes. Four numbers were leased to Nashboro Records who placed them on the group's **Step by Step** album (Creed 3001.) Two of the four numbers xare included on this CD, "Try me Father," a dramatic gospelization of J.B.'s 1958 hit"Try me," and "That's the spirit" as testified by the Reverend Willingham.

"Step by Step," the title of the album, is not in any way a James Brown production. Brown's relationship with The Swanees dates back long before 1966. J.B. and The Swanee Quintet grew up in the same town, Augusta, Georgia. Brown often stopped by whenever the quintet gave a concert performance.

The 1944 founders of the group were a trio composed of Charles Barnwell, tenor and baritone lead, Rufus Washington, tenor, and William Crawford, tenor, guitar, and arrangements.

By 1950, The Swanee Trio enlarged and took aboard the Reverend Ruben W. Willingham, lead baritone, and James Anderson, yet another tenor. The group was not disposed towards a strong bass vocalist. It did not suit their style. However, legend tells that The Fairfield Four's basso Dickie Freeman once sung in the outfit. Thus, in 1950, The Swanee Quintet of Augusta, Georgia was formed and not long thereafter pacted with Nashboro Records of Nashville, Tennessee.

In 1953, during The Swanees' second session, the group recorded the intensely powerful "Sit down servant." The song is a mournful, wailing ritual with voodoo undertones led by Willingham and Barnwell. "Sit down servant" took off and became a best seller in gospel circles. In 1956, the quintet became a sextet with the adoption of Little Johnny Jones, perhaps the finest, most delicate falsetto lead of all time. Jones had a highly perfected yodel and possessed a unique way of splitting one note into two effortlessly. Little Johnny had doubled the group's fortunes, and by 1957 The Swanees were playing Carnegie Hall in New York.



A year later the boys recorded "Sleep on mother," a hauntingly beautiful, wailing dirge with its hypnotic harmonies embellished by the sweeping falsetto figures from the formidable Jones. "Sleep on mother" is by far The Swanees' highest pinnacle.

In July 1959, Nashboro put out "What about me," an uptempo foot stomper led by Willingham sung in customary sermon-like manner. "What about me" sold impressively but not so well as "Lowly Jesus," a moving ballad sung with all the trickeration in the book by the warm, tender pipes of Johnny Jones who clothed the melody with the sweetest sounds. That Christmas, Reverend Willingham's "New Walk" was launched and The Swanees' reputation soared as record sales reached impressive ceilings. Willingham's performance of the "New Walk" in public included an unforgettable terpsichored demonstration which left the audience in a state of awe.

"Holy Ghost got me" hit the gospel stores in 1960. This uptempo vehicle found Jones yodeling and flexing his voice while Willingham raised the heated sanctification which brought the rendition to a powerful conclusion. With the 1961 release of "One more river to cross," we are back with the wailing, high tenor harmonies fronted by Willingham who laid on the adamant testimony.

"Take the Lord with you" is another Jones yodeling masterwork, highlighted by great honky tonk-like piano fills. From 1961 we jump to 1966 and the aforementioned James Brown session. "Try me Father" and "That's the spirit" were originally issued on a single on Syd Nathan's Federal label. The songs were later leased to Nashboro for inclusion on Creed LP 3001. "Try me Father" is a gospel-soul masterpiece with Jones' intensely emotional falsetto weaving and soaring all through the big band arrangements. "That's the spirit" is another

Willingham vehicle and grooves along like one of J.B.'s own waxings. "Step by step" finds Johnny up to his old tricks and in perfect form.

By 1967, Reverend Willingham was only an occasional member of the group, having drifted more and more towards a solo career which would ultimately net him thirteen album releases, some including The Swanees' backing. Willingham was replaced by lead Percy Griffin. Anderson and Washington were gone and Lee Wallace was taken on. Percy leads on on the hard-driving gospel belter "Strong determination" released on the Creed subsidiary in 1968. "Ups and downs," the CD's bonus track, is a tough gospel soul ballad led by Griffin with both coarse and sweet vocal delivery.

Little Johnny Jones was sidetracked into recording under his own imprint with his own group, The Johnny Jones Singers, by early 1969. They cut three albums. Jones topped this by spending a brief time over in the devil's workshop. Signing with Bobby Robinson's Harlem-based Fire and Fury empire, Johnny cut a handful of R & B soul ballads, the most impressive of which was a hip country version of "Tennessee Waltz" which almost dented the lower end of the R & B charts.

The Swanee Quintet continued to record for the Nashboro and Ernie's labels. Their star forever glows in the gospel hall of fame.

— Opal Louis Nations
November 1994.

Executive Producer:
Patti Drosins

Reissue produced by:
Bob Perry - Rob Santos

Compiled by: Bob Perry -
Matt Starr - Skippy White

Art Direction/Design by:
Mitchell Kanner

Liner notes by:
Opal Louis Nations
Project Assistants:
Robert Y. Kim - Michael Russell

Special Thanks:
David Sanjek - B.M.I. Archives

Mastered by:
Jonathan Wyner at
M Works Cambridge MA.