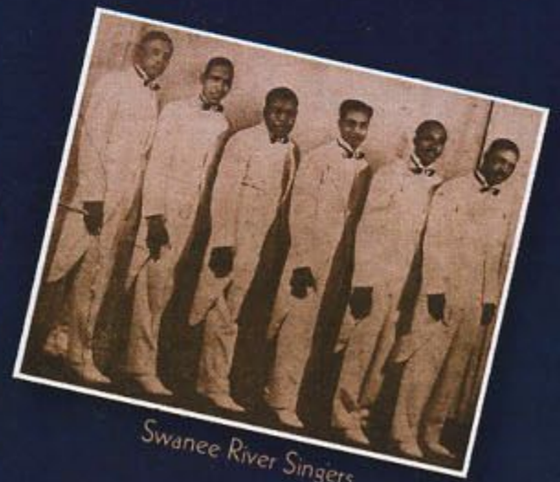
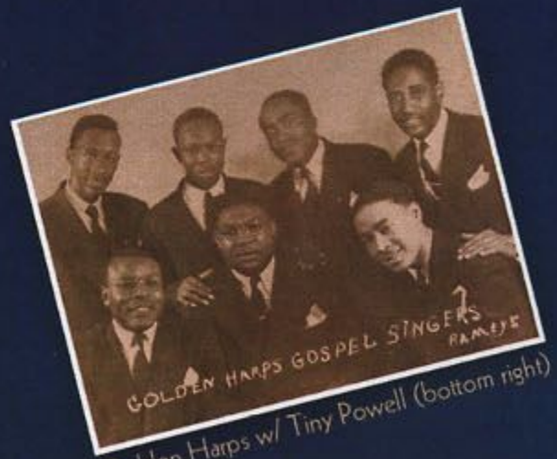
Lathanettes w/ Odessa Perkins (center)

Odessa Perkins



Swanee River Singers



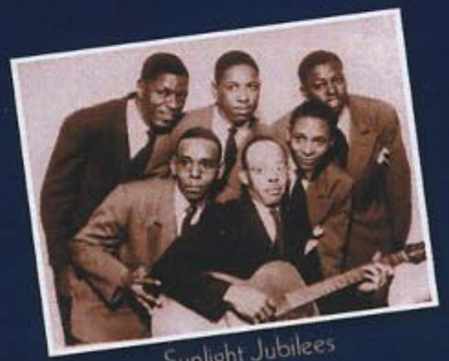
Golden Harps w/ Tiny Powell (bottom right)

Swingin' on the Golden Gate vol. 2

A Survey of Bay Area Gospel

Apollos

Golden Keys



Sunlight Jubilees

Valley Wonders

"Swingin' On The Golden Gate" Vol. 2 – A Survey of Bay Area Gospel

Gospel music in the San Francisco Bay Area sprang into being in the Twenties and Thirties and was mainly an East Bay phenomenon which thrived through the healthy growth of the church establishment.

The growth and significance of the black church in the San Francisco Bay Area

The first Bay Area black Baptist church was the Beth Eden, founded in February 1889. The first black Methodist church in Oakland was the Parks Chapel AME founded in 1920. By the 1940s, storefront churches had sprung up everywhere to cater to those too poor to own a Sunday suit.

The development of the black church establishment ran more or less parallel to the growth of jazz (Dixieland, in particular) in the cosmopolitan areas of San Francisco.

During the 1930s, traveling groups of jubilee singers and evangelist ministers stopped over briefly on their way from Seattle to Los Angeles. The Bay Area's first pivotal figure was William Elmer Keeton, born on Valentine's Day, 1882 in Rolla, Missouri. After receiving a doctorate in medicine and serving as bandmaster for the Ninth Cavalry, Keeton moved out to Oakland in 1921 when Woodrow Wilson left the White House. He opened a music studio on Ninth Street and taught organ, piano and music theory. He began conducting recitals and establishing a musical repertoire centered on traditional Negro spirituals and European opera. He melded both types of music into a form of widely recognized "concert" gospel which rapidly spread into Southern California where it flourished on a broader scale.

He also served as organist and music master for the First African Methodist Episcopal Church, the East Bay's first all-black church. Apart from other organizational activity and fund-raising, Keeton put together a spiritual quartet who performed on "Keeton's Brown Variety Hour" over KFWM.

In 1935, with support from the WPA, Keeton established the sixty-member a-cappella Keeton Chorus based at Oakland's Masonic Temple, yet another seminal church. In 1938, the well-paid chorus became the first black aggregation to play the outdoor pavilion at Stern Grove in San Francisco. The Keeton Chorus stayed together into 1943, four years before Keeton's death on New Year's Day, 1947.

Narrator Rev. John Mickle put out a 78 RPM book set (for home use only) of selective parts of African-American history. Mickle's monolog was accompanied by the Keeton Memorial Chorus on The Negro America Transcribed label (Vol. 1.)

Creole Betty Reid Soskin and her family moved from Louisiana to San Francisco in the late 1920s. Attending St. Bernard's church as a child, she was perplexed to see white folks in the center aisle and scatterings of blacks at the sides. Apart from the aforementioned churches, she cites the Third Baptist in the City and Father Wallace's ministry on West Street and MacArthur in Oakland as also being two of the first established black churches.

Betty and her husband Mel Reid opened the first black gospel and blues record store in West Oakland in 1945. Two years later, Mel acquired time on Berkeley's KRE radio station and broadcast a weekly thirty-minute gospel program called Religious Gems. Mel opened a second store, on Sacramento Street in Berkeley – it still exists to this day. Mel's uncle, Paul, took over Mel's radio spot and added "Spirituals at 6" in 1957. Mel, Betty and Paul presented Gospel Extravaganzas at The Oakland Auditorium during the 1950s. They also held "quartet battles" and choir competitions.

A short while after the founding of the record store, Paul set up the Reid Record Company. One of the first releases was the exciting two-part "Invocation" by the 8th Annual Convocation Churches of God in Christ, a live recording made in San Francisco. The Bay Area is noted for recording some of the earliest live black church songs and sermons. (See Rev. George Killens' sermon, "Great god Almighty," included on this set.) Congregational singing also became a popularly recorded part of the black church service.

In 1938, the Mount Pleasant Baptist Church Choir under the musical direction of Bessie Mack made quite a name for itself singing gospel songs.

The well-mannered Keeton-type concert recitals of the 1930s were to an extent usurped in the 1940s by the more extravagant, fundamentalist, blue collar black church services serving migrants from the South. The impact was explosive. Baptist divas such as Lillian Glenn Smith and Lillian Holmes became prominent soloists.

To demonstrate that well-performed choral jubilee singing was still very much alive, despite the onslaught of gospel music of a revivalist nature, Cleveland's celebrated Wings over Jordan Choir came to the Bay Area to concertize after World War II.

The Church of God in Christ was first established in the Bay Area in the early 1930s. In 1936, acting as supervisor, Faidest Naomi McCardell-Wagoner organized the first C.O.G.I.C. choir. This was a year after Keeton formed his chorus. Apart from teaching music, Wagoner supported Sam Cooke, Tommy Jenkins, the Joy Spreaders and the Angelaires on piano both in concert and on recordings.

Tommy Jenkins is represented here singing both with the Rising Star Gospel Singers and Mountain Stars in 1946 on Donald Hemby's (Hembly's) Pacific label and Bob Geddins' Big Town. Some of the excellent Rising Stars sides were recorded at KRE in Berkeley where the Rising Stars enjoyed their own weekly gospel program, singing and fielding requests from listeners. Hemby was also a disc jockey at the station.

The Joy Spreaders, supported by Edwin Hawkins on piano, were affiliated with the C.O.G.I.C., as were the Andrews

Sisters (Sunshine Band) who recorded for Miracle Valley and Capitol, and the Edwin Hawkins Singers. (Only the Andrews are included here.)

Another female outfit, the Golden Echoes with Mary Bolden, came out of the Evergreen Baptist Church. They were organized by James Lee Richards from Texas and enjoyed a fifteen-minute weekly radio broadcast on a Warner Brothers station. They increased membership from three to six and renamed themselves the J.L. Richards Specials. Listen to the group's unique blending of voices on one of their best recorded songs for Tru-Tone Records in 1946.

Many Bay Area Baptist churches enjoyed air-time. The Evergreen (on KWBR), St. John's (on KLX), the award-winning Third Baptist, plus the Macedonia, Antioch and McGee Avenue ministries who were able to garner daytime listenership during the 1950s. The McGee Baptist is represented here with an inspirational selection on Har-Tone. The Third Baptist's rendition is from its own vanity label – Inspirational Chorus. St. John's Baptist is included with an exciting gospel service lead by Rev. Carl J. Anderson, one of the East Bay's most prominent ministers. Whether the popular El Bethel Baptist enjoyed radio exposure is not known to me, but they did produce Odessa Perkins who became one of the Bay Area's most dynamic soloists during the 1960s.

Spiritualism was also part of the Bay Area's church fabric. The most charismatic minister of them all was the self-appointed Louis H. Narcisse who has appeared on many Bay Area small label collections and is featured on one of his many self-produced transcriptions made at his church in Oakland.

Narcisse was born in Gretna, Louisiana in April 1921 and moved to Vallejo in the late 1930s. He opened his first storefront church, the Second Baptist, in 1941. He sang and played piano. Possessing a magnificent voice and a propensity for drawing people to him, he soon filled his church to overflowing on Sunday nights. Forced into finding larger premises, he moved in 1943 to Oakland's Fourteenth Street and founded The Mt. Zion Spiritual Temple (for all people).

In the 1950s, his services were broadcast late at night over KLX. Transcriptions of the service could be purchased for a modest sum through his mail order company. Theola Kilgore was Narcisse's most popular church soloist. Narcisse had the uncanny knack of being able to make himself into a desirable commercial property. His followers showered money and gifts upon him, including fancy automobiles. He reciprocated by bestowing copious hands-on blessings. A thirty-minute documentary of Narcisse's life was made for German television. It was filmed in the early 1960s. Narcisse died in February, 1989, leaving his worldly wealth and church affairs in utter turmoil.

It was not for naught that Oakland became the Bay Area focus for African American church music during the 1950s.

The Bay Area gospel quartet tradition

In 1910, there were 3,055 African Americans living in Oakland. By 1945, the figure had risen to 37,327. Many church quartet singers who had come to the Bay Area from the southlands during World War II brought their religious musical expressions with them. A good deal of these men had been inspired by the work of the Golden Gate Quartet who began recording commercially in 1937 and broadcasting on a syndicated basis from South Carolina. Another early syndicated quartet was the Jubileers (Royal Harmony Singers) who aired over Chicago's KYW. Both groups were popular enough to enjoy a broad, cross-over appeal.

Although the Spiritual Five of Houston were the first impressive male quartet to come to the Bay Area in 1937, the Rising Stars were the first prominent local outfit. The Rising Stars were formed in 1943 by James Wiltz around church-shaking lead baritone singer Paul Foster Snr and lilting tenor genius Tommy Jenkins who later dabbled slightly in R&B. The group's tenor singer Elbridge Vann also sang in Bob Geddins' vocal quartet, the Cavaliers.

The Rising Stars in their Post-war glory were only ever beaten out in "quartet battles" by Abraham Battle and the Southern Travelers. Other significant quartets included tenor / baritone / manager Archie Reynolds and the Paramount Gospel Singers featuring the ear-splitting tenor chops of Vance "Tiny" Powell who briefly recorded with Archie Brownlee and the Five Blind Boys of Mississippi in 1951. Their history dates all the way back to the late 1930s and their formation in Austin, Texas. They migrated to San Francisco around 1944.

Another prominent Bay Area quartet was the underrated Golden West Singers of Richmond, California who are presented here by an early Della side. The Golden West Singers, lead by Robert Hartfield, recorded for Ajax in 1956 and with Melvin Shepherd at the helm, waxed shortly thereafter for Ray Dobard's Music City label. They waxed for West Coast in the 1960s and with a fresh bunch of soldiers under Shepherd's leadership cut sides again for San Francisco's Golden Soul label during the 1980s. The original outfit was a tight and thrilling group formed out of members of North Richmond High School in 1947. Both blues stylist Johnny Fuller and soul merchant minister Joe Simon sang briefly with the Golden West Singers. The Golden West Singers survive to this day. The group (which sings a-cappella) is currently made up of the original members' sons and cousins

Additional stand-out quartets included the Sunlight Jubilee Singers of Alameda, Walter Green and the traditional Swanee River Singers, who stuck with the old a-cappella format for many years after it went out of vogue, and the Golden Keys of Oakland organized by record store proprietor Talmadge Emerson in 1950.

In March of 1943, Maxine Blackburn organized a Gospel Singers' Fellowship Circle. The purpose of this organization was to establish closer ties between choirs of other churches, a sharing of talent and resources, to improve and build up Sunday evening services and to raise funds to buy music and defray expenses of choir needs. Out of this, a fellowship of choirs (mass choir) was put together at the Oakland Auditorium in August, 1948.

The idea of a "mass choir" and its impact on the church community were certainly picked up by choral pioneer Sir Jules Haywood who is included on this collection with the 79th Baptist Convention Thousand Voice Choir of San Francisco. Haywood frequently conducted mass choirs in San Francisco during their heyday in the 1950s.

Maxine Blackburn's ideas certainly inspired Abraham Battle. Battle was born in Haynesville, Louisiana. He moved to Oakland during World War II. Inspired by the Golden Gate Quartet, Battle put a group together called the Starlight Quartet, utilizing singers from his storefront church, the William Chapel Baptist. The Starlights became polished and competitive and won out in "quartet battles."

The Southern Travelers and the Rising Star Gospel Singers competed for public acclaim over KWBR at the time. After a tour with the Gay Brothers, managed by Battle, the original Southern Travelers split up. Drawing from other groups, Battle rebuilt the Southern Travelers and made them into a winning team. They recorded for Bob Geddins on Big Town. But because the War had taken many singers away and engagements were scarce, Battle was forced to disband the Southern Travelers. He briefly hitched up with the Silver Stars and got them a regular show over KRE.

Disenchanted by the way things were going in the quartet world, Battle decided to do something about it. Inspired by Maxine Blackburn's work, Battle opted to try and pool talent by forming an alliance. Battle was blessed with natural business skills and management ability. He gathered together quartets from around the West Coast area and formed the Standard Jubilee Singers Convention. At first the idea seemed to work on the basis of mutual support. A meeting was held at the old Carla Hotel on Fourteenth and Market Streets in San Francisco in 1949. Groups around the table included the Soul Stirrers, Famous Blue Jay Singers and the Pilgrim Travelers.

A convention charter was drawn up in support of equal rights for both professional and semi-professional groups, and circulated across the country. Unity prevailed which lead to the setting up of the National Quartet Convention under the stewardship of Rev. Kellum of Dallas. Battle became head of the Oakland chapter. A percentage of earnings was ascribed as dues and placed into a general fund. A national headquarters was set up in Chicago in 1952.

More widely known singers took issue with the fact that they had to pay more in dues than those of lesser reputation and financial draw. The major groups wanted a larger slice of the benefits, leaving less for those who had to struggle to make ends meet. By 1956, Battle had grown apprehensive and skeptical of the path the organization had taken. More money was going to fly delegates to conventions than to the artists.

Battle resigned in 1957 and set up the American Singers Association, an organization to fund housing and care for financially strapped, elderly African-American singers and artists. The Harriet Tubman apartments for such artists needing care was opened in Berkeley in 1972. The A.S.A. survives to this day.

The importance of Sly Stone in the development of popular African American music in the greater Bay Area cannot be denied. The Stewart family came to the Bay Area from Denton, Texas during World War II. Alpha, the mother of the family and an extremely religious woman, was soon involved with the Emmanuel Branch of the Church of God in Christ of Northern California whose music department was organized by Fairdest Naomi Wagoner in 1938.

The Stewart family became a part of the Bay Area's "gospel singing stream" when the Stewart Four gospel singers were formed in 1948. Sly, Freddie, Rose and Vaetta were all members who often stood around the family piano of an evening as Alpha played popular gospel melodies for the group. In 1952, lead singer Sylvester "Sly" Stone was only eight years old. The Stewart Four recorded for the C.O.G.I.C.'s own label, Church In Christ around this time. One side of their only release featured Sly singing and playing guitar on "Walking in Jesus name."

While in high school, Freddie and Sly joined a mixed member and gender group called variously the Viscaynes or Biscaynes. As the Biscaynes, Sly and the group enjoyed a Bay Area hit with their beautiful, lilting rendition of "Yellow moon" on V.P.M. in 1961.

In May 1969 the San Francisco Bay Area gospel scene became the central focus of the world when "Oh happy day" sung by Dorothy Morrison and the Northern California State Youth Choir conducted by Edwin Hawkins blasted its way up the music charts. It made it into the number two spot on Billboard charts and sold thousands of copies around the globe.

– Opal Louis Nations, April 2011 –
Excerpted from an original text dated February 2009

With invaluable assistance from Rejoice Stovall, Ola Jean Andrews, Betty Reid Soskin, Adell Lee, Abraham Battle, Mark Carrodus, Lee Hildebrand, Bob Bell and Wade of Jack's Record Cellar