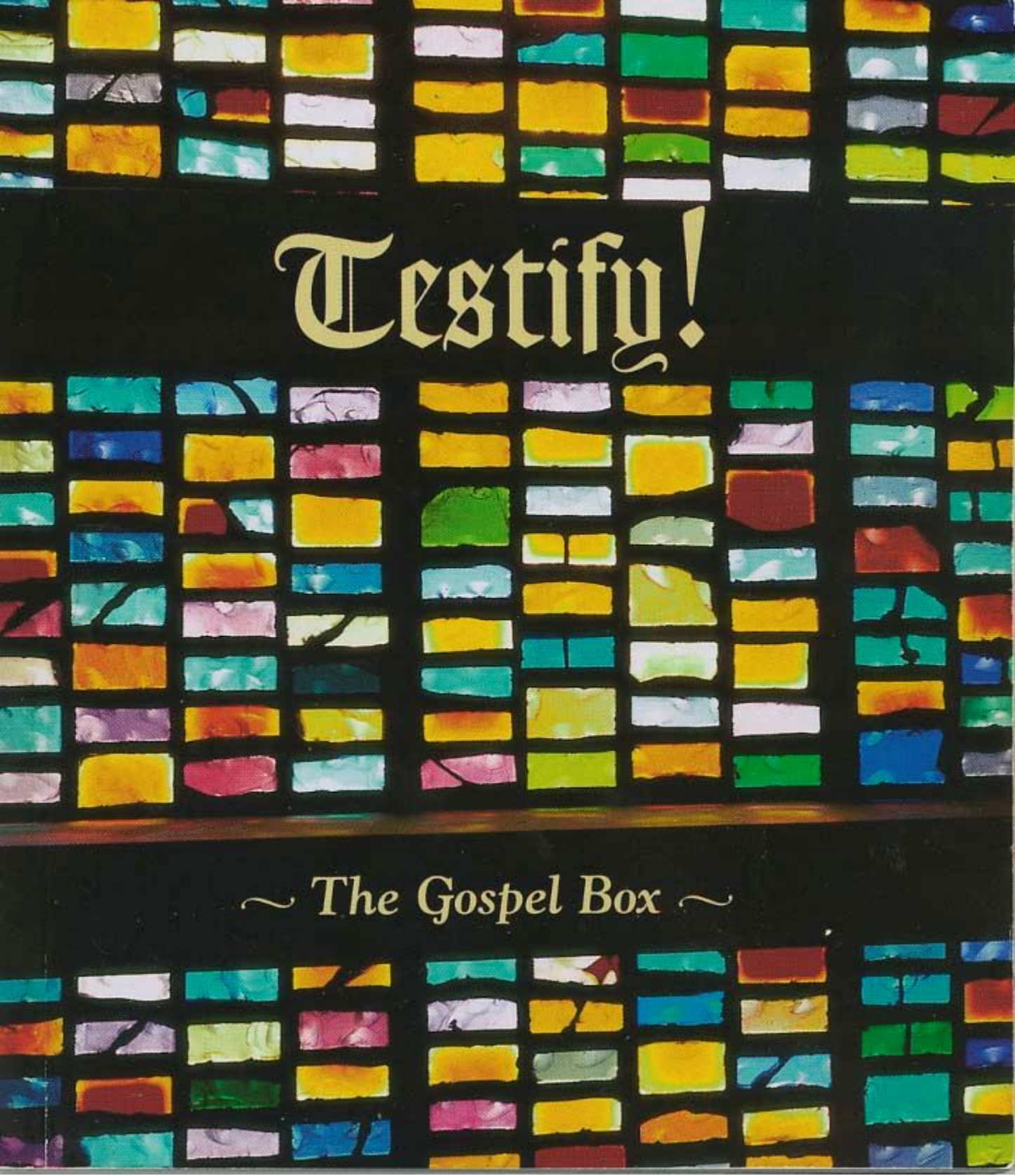
Testify!
~ The Gospel Box ~

Disc One

1/1. Praise The Lord And Pass The Ammunition · *The Southern Sons Quartette*

Founded at Prudential Park in Newark, New Jersey, circa 1935, the Sons are closely aligned with the Golden Gates, who brought to prominence the jubilee style of quartet singing. The original Sons consisted of Charles Wesley Hill, baritone; Kisler (or Kissler) Baxter, first tenor and guitar; Howard Wilson, tenor; Junior Thomas, tenor; and Johnny Robinson. The quartet—which by the early '40s was composed of Baxter; Bill Landford, tenor; Hill; and Clifford Givens, bass—signed with RCA in 1941 and a year later recorded the widely popular "Praise The Lord And Pass The Ammunition," a morale-booster for our fighting men. The Sons' interpretation of the song surpasses those of other groups if only for its dramatic use of on-the-battlefield sound effects.

1/2. Stalin Wasn't Stallin' · *The Golden Gate Jubilee Quartet*

The Gates' original alumni—Henry Owens, lead; Clyde Riddick, tenor; Willie "Bill" Johnson, baritone; and Orlandus Wilson, bass—were students together at Booker T. Washington High in Norfolk, Virginia. Together they became perhaps the most popular gospel quartet of the '40s.

Their well-polished sound often crossed over into "barbershop" and popular music, where scores of would-be harmonists tried to emulate them. The outfit's style emphasized close harmony and accentuated rhythm. Beginning in 1925, the Gates appeared on live radio broadcasts over WBT in Charlotte, and their popularity spread when their programs were syndicated down the Eastern seaboard. The Gates soon came to the attention of RCA/Bluebird Record, which began recording them in 1937.

1/3. Milky White Way · *The Trumpeteers*

One of the last successful jubilee quartets of the late '40s, The Trumpeteers were blessed with one of the first reputed million-selling records, Landers Coleman's "Milky White Way." It was a song that opened doors at major record

~ The Trumpeteers ~

companies for other leading gospel outfits.

The group's first solid lineup included Joe Johnson, lead; Joseph Armstrong, baritone; and from the original Willing Four, James Keels, bass, and Raleigh Turnage, tenor. While working in Baltimore at radio station WCAO and cutting transcriptions for O'Sullivan Shoe Heels & Soles, they were noticed by Columbia Broadcasting executives, who signed them to a daily syndicated contract. This sparked the interest of Aladdin Records in Los Angeles, for which the group recorded 43 songs between 1947 and 1949.

1/4. Don't Let Nobody Turn You Around · *The Fairfield Four*

The Fairfield Four and The Radio Four were the two most popular mid-Southern male quartets of the '40s and '50s. The Four were formed as a trio during the '20s by pastor Rev. J.R. Statton at Nashville's Sunday school of the Fairfield Baptist Church, where they were trained by assistant pastor Rev. J.R. Carrethers. It was J.R.'s sons Rufus and Harold, along with neighbor John Battle, who made up the original lineup.

~ The Fairfield Four ~

Recorded in 1947, "Don't Let Nobody Turn You Around" was the Four's third record for the Bullet imprint and their first major success. At this point the group was composed of Sam McCrary, lead; Edward Thomas, tenor; James Hill, baritone; Willie Frank Lewis, utility; and Rufus Carrethers, the sole surviving original recruit, bass.

1/5. That's Enough · *Dorothy Love Coates & The Original Gospel Harmonettes*

The Original Gospel Harmonettes were formed in Birmingham, Alabama, in the wake of the 1940 National Baptist Convention. Pianist, composer, and arranger Evelyn Starks and second soprano Mildred Madison Miller decided to form the group out of convention choir members. Together they handpicked singers Odessa Glasgow Edwards, second alto; Vera Conner Kolb, first soprano; and Willie Mae Brooks Newberry, first alto.

Former fill-in singer, the tough, sometimes raggedy Dorothy Love Coates, joined the group as

lead in 1950 after they recorded for RCA Victor. Love composed "That's Enough," which became a national hit in late 1956. By this point the group's members were Love, Miller, Newberry, Kolb, and Edwards, plus the great Herbert "Pee Wee" Pickard on piano. Together, the group tore up churches across the country with their wild singing and firey abandonment.

1/6. Just A Closer Walk With Thee - *Sallie Martin Singers*

Born in Pittfield, Georgia, in 1896, the great Sallie Martin was the first genuine singer of gospel songs. Her down-home style was rough, extroverted, and initially at odds with Thomas A. Dorsey's fledgling gospel movement.

She arrived in Chicago by way of Cleveland in 1927 and joined The Dorsey Trio that same year. It was at this point that she began organizing the National Convention of Gospel Choirs and Choruses, of which she served as vice president for the rest of her life. With gospel composer Kenneth Morris, she established the Martin & Morris Music Publishing Company in Chicago in 1940, an organization that made her the wealthiest black gospel artist of the postwar period. That same year she formed the Sallie Martin Singers with Roberta Martin (no relation), Willie Webb, and Eugene Smith.

Relocating to California, the Sallie Martin Singers—consisting of Cora, Sallie, and singer/composer Doris Akers—signed with Capitol Records and recorded the prayerful Just A Closer Walk With Thee," which also became a major Martin & Morris hit in sheet-music form.

1/7. Our Father - *Original Five Blind Boys (Jackson Harmoneers)*

The Original Five Blind Boys of Mississippi were one of the major forces in the development of swing lead, strident falsetto, screams, shrieks, and other tricks of the hard-sung gospel trade. The Cotton Blossom Singers, as they were initially named, were formed by Archie Brownlee in 1932 out of classmates at the Piney Wood School for the Blind. Originals members included Brownlee, Sam Lewis, Lloyd Woodard, Lawrence Abrams, and Joseph Ford. Switching their name to The Jackson Harmoneers, the group sang novelty tunes and spirituals at concert recitals. The boys turned professional in 1944; and six years later they waxed the hit "Our Father" with Brownlee at the helm, Vance Powell replacing Lewis, and Jay T. Clinkscales stepping into Ford's shoes. They would go on to become one of the most exciting quartets on the road.

1/8. Too Close To Heaven - *The Bradford Specials*

~ The Bradford Specials ~

Singer, composer, keyboardist, actor, choreographer, talent scout—Professor Alex Bradford is now considered one of the cornerstones in the development of postwar gospel music.

Born in 1927 in Bessemer, Alabama, Bradford joined a children's gospel group called The Protective Harmoneers in 1940. After serving in the armed forces and moving to Chicago, he and his group were presented in concert by Robert Anderson. Befriending Mahalia Jackson, Bradford briefly became the great diva's secretary and traveling companion.

In 1949 Bradford joined the Willie Webb Singers as soloist. A year later, he formed his own group of singers, and by 1953 he joined Specialty Records as both an artist and talent scout. He stayed with the label for six years, during which time he recorded dozens of sides, the first of which, "Too Close To Heaven," became the biggest gospel hit of 1953.

~ Dixie Hummingbirds ~

1/9. Let's Go Out To The Programs - *Dixie Hummingbirds*

Baritone James B. Davis formed The 'Birds in Greenville, South Carolina, during the '20s. Original membership was drawn from the junior chorus of the Bethel Church of God: Barney Gibson, lead; Davis, tenor; Barney Parks, baritone; and J.B. Matterson, bass. Initially they played local church venues, calling themselves The Sterling High Quartet, named after their high school. When Fred Owens replaced Matterson, the boys switched monikers to the Dixie Hummingbirds and set about singing sweet, sentimental minors and smooth jubilee

songs. The group went from jubilee to jubilee jazz to an open form of gospel singing built around two or more strong leads.

By 1953 the Hummingbirds were Beachey Thompson and Ira B. Tucker, baritone leads; Davis, baritone; Willie Bobo, bass; and Howard Carroll, guitar. It was at this time that they recorded "Let's Go Out To The Programs," the first of two sketches of the leading gospel-talent venues of the time.

~ The Highway Q.C.'s ~

1/10. Amazing Grace · *Rev. Maceo Woods*

Maceo Woods was born April 23, 1932, in South Chicago's Morgan Park. Barely out of his teens, he organized The Maceo Woods Male Chorus from members of The Mt. Calvary Baptist Church. Out of the chorus evolved The Maceo Woods Singers.

By 1952 Maceo signed with Vee-Jay Records, operated by Vivian and John Carter. Vivian hosted a radio show on WWCA in Gary, Indiana. One day during a break, Maceo, who occasionally played interludes on Vivian's program, was noodling on the organ. Vivian was instantly taken by his fool-around run-through of "Amazing Grace." She secretly taped it and made it the new theme to her show, after which it became a much-requested item. The tape was then made into a record, which became a best-seller.

1/11. Alone And Motherless · *The Original Five Blind Boys Of Alabama*

The tough-singing Original Blind Boys—lead by the awesome, soulful Clarence Fountain—date back to World War II, when the six chorus members of the Talladega School for the Blind near Birmingham, Alabama, put their vocal talents together. Original alumni included Velma Trailer, lead; Tommy Gilmore, tenor; Clarence Fountain, lead and tenor; George Scott, tenor; Olice Thomas, baritone; and Johnny Fields, bass. Initially calling themselves The Happyland Singers, they eventually broke away from the school and headed for Birmingham, where they were heard regularly over both WSGN and WKAX.

From 1953 to 1957 The Original Five Blind Boys Of Alabama recorded for Specialty Records of Hollywood. "Alone And Motherless" was the group's fourth Specialty single.

1/12. Somewhere To Lay My Head · *The Highway Q.C.'s*

The Q.C.'s formed in 1945, when a group of street singers—Lee Richardson, tenor lead; Gus Treadwell, tenor; Creedell Copeland, baritone; Marvin Jones, second baritone; and Charles "Jake" Richardson, bass—got together to harmonize in a hallway. The boys decided to call themselves The Teenage Highway Q.C.'s after The Highway Baptist Church & Q.C. High School of Chicago. One day Sam Cooke was walking by chance in the neighborhood when he caught the boys in rehearsal and started to sing along. Stunned by Cooke's flowery tenor, the group invited him to join.

Cooke quit The Q.C.'s in 1950 to join The Soul Stirrers, and Johnnie Taylor replaced him. In 1955, with Sonny Mitchell in Treadwell's place, Jones gone, and Taylor in the spotlight, the group recorded the achingly seductive "Somewhere To Lay My Head," a song firmly rooted in the tradition of The Swans and The Soul Stirrers.

1/13. Uncloudy Day · *The Staple Singers*

"Pops" Staples was born December 28, 1915, the seventh of 14 children in the rural town of Winona, Mississippi. While at school, he met Oceola Ware, and they were married in 1933. Cleotha Staples was born in 1934; son Pervis was born a year later. By 1935 Pops was seeking work up in Chicago, and once he'd obtained a job at a meat-packing plant, he sent for his family.

After the birth of Yvonne in 1938 and Mavis in 1939, Pops began singing in various male quartets in his spare time. By 1948 he started organizing the children into a singing quartet. The group's popularity spread rapidly, and in 1956 they signed with Vee-Jay Records, at which time their second release, the haunting "Uncloudy Day," took the gospel world by storm.

~ The Staple Singers ~

1/14. All Things Are Possible - *The Harmonizing Four*

The smooth-hymn and spiritual-singing Harmonizing Four of Richmond, Virginia, got together in 1927 in the playground of Dunbar Elementary School. Four second- and third-grade students—John T. Scott, first and second tenor; Joe Curby, second tenor; Lawrence Hatcher, baritone; and Willie Peyton, bass—formed the original unit.

By 1952 the classic lineup was in place: Thomas Johnson, lead tenor; Lonnie Smith, tenor; Joseph Williams, baritone; and the legendary Jimmy Jones, bass. Jones was replaced by Thomas' son, Ellis, in 1957, when the elegant "All Things Are Possible" became an enormous success.

1/15. Didn't It Rain - *Mahalia Jackson*

Born in a New Orleans ghetto on October 26, 1911, Mahalia (Mahala) Jackson grew up in the Baptist church. Moving to Chicago in 1927, she soon became a lifelong friend of noted gospel writer/pioneer Thomas A. Dorsey. She earned the title of Gospel Queen with her 1947 cover of "Move On Up A Little Higher," a song first recorded by Queen Anderson.

In August 1958 Jackson recorded the driving, exulting "Didn't It Rain," which had won great acclaim in its earlier live version recorded at The Newport Jazz Festival that same year. It is said that it was raining the night of Jackson's appearance and that the showers ceased just as soon as she started into the song.

~ Rev. James Cleveland ~

1/16. The Love Of God - *Voices Of The Tabernacle, featuring Rev. James Cleveland*

Rev. James Edward Cleveland, born December 5, 1931, in Chicago, was the wearer of many hats: pianist, gospel singer, composer, choir master, conductor, producer, and, in 1968, organizer of The Gospel Music Workshop of America. For Cleveland, the Crown Prince of Gospel, piano lessons started early—at age five. Three years later, he became soloist in Thomas A. Dorsey's Junior Gospel Choir at Dorsey's Pilgrim Baptist. In 1946 he joined the unrecorded Thorne Crusaders. As lead high-tenor vocalist with The Thornes, Cleveland strained and damaged his vocal chords, resulting in his subsequent throaty, gravely register—hence the secondary tag—the Louis Armstrong of Gospel.

While based in Detroit, Cleveland became involved with Rev. Craig's Prayer Tabernacle. His first waxing with the choir was "The Love Of God," which became a tremendous hit both in 1959 and again in 1961, when it was recorded for Savoy Records.

1/17. Precious Lord - *LaVern Baker with Prof. Alex Bradford & The Bradford Singers*

LaVern Baker was born Delores Williams on November 11, 1929. Her style has been described as full-throated, vibrant, and loud . . . with a sexy tease. Although a popular singer/recording artist for most of her life, Baker never truly strayed from her roots in the church.

In 1953 she signed with Atlantic Records, and her star ascended. And, as mentioned above, her ballad singing always evoked a strong gospel feel. Had they been hummed, numbers like "I Can't Hold Out Any Longer" and her cover of Faye Adams' "Shake A Hand" could have been tailored for the church.

In 1959 Baker teamed up with old pal Prof. Alex Bradford & The Bradford Singers. The result was the stunning single "Precious Lord," a song described as one of the first marriages of R&B and gospel music.

1/18. Mary Don't You Weep - *The Swan Silvertones*

The Swans go way back to the mid-'30s, when Claude Jeter, having completed high school in Kentucky, began working in the coal mines across the border in West Virginia. To provide entertainment, Jeter organized The Four Harmony Kings, which later consisted of Jeter, his brother, and two mining buddies. The group developed a reputation as a sweet-singing quartet.

In the early '40s The Four Harmony Kings moved to Knoxville, Tennessee. Having sustained a

~ The Swan Silvertones ~

regular Sunday morning spot at WDIR, they changed their name to The Silvertone Singers for two reasons: to avoid confusion with the Four Kings Of Harmony and to elicit additional publicity for The Swan Bakery, the quartet's radio sponsor.

In 1959 the group was composed of Claude Jeter, tenor/falsetto lead; Louis Johnson, baritone/lead; John Myles, baritone; William "Pete" Connor, bass; and Linwood Hargrove, guitar. "Mary Don't You Weep" became the group's strongest seller.

1/19. **One More River To Cross** - ***The Meditation Singers with Earnestine Rundless***

The hard-singing Meditations were organized by Earnestine Rundless in 1947 and quickly became Detroit's answer to Philadelphia's Davis Sisters. The original lineup was composed of Rundless (lead soprano), would-be cabaret singer Della Reece, her sister Marie Waters, and Lillian Mitchell. In 1960 The Meditations recorded for the Hob label, for which they cut "One More River To Cross," lead by Earnestine and Laura Lee, who went on to even greater heights singing soul music on Chess Records.

1/20. **Good Enough For Me** - ***Rev. James Cleveland & The Gospel Chimes***

Jessy Dixon was born in San Antonio, Texas, on March 12, 1938. He studied piano at St. Mary's College with the aim of becoming a concert pianist. After two years at St. Mary's, he served for a time as Brother Joe May's accompanist. In 1960 Dixon moved to Detroit and joined James

Cleveland's Gospel Chimes alongside Caravans and Davis Sisters veteran Imogene Greene and Dorothy Norwood, also from The Caravans. Inez Andrews and Shirley Caesar replaced Greene and Norwood in The Caravans following a rift within the group.

The Gospel Chimes, who recorded "Good Enough For Me," were quite different from the unit into which they evolved. Norwood quit the group after only a year to pursue a highly successful solo career. Greene returned briefly to The Davis Sisters but was soon back in the lineup. The Gospel Chimes evolved from a mixed, balanced aggregation into a predominantly male one with the addition of Claude O. Timmons and Lee Charles Neeley, who can be heard on the Savoy recordings beginning in the mid-'60s.

—Opal Louis Nations

Born in Brighton, England, Opal Nations is a music producer and a writer of both fiction and music journalism. He is also a former DJ on KPFK in Berkeley and a vocalist with the '60s groups Alexis Korner Band, The Frays, and The Ram Holder Group.

~ The Meditation Singers ~