The Famous Blue Jay Singers 1946

The Gospel Wonders

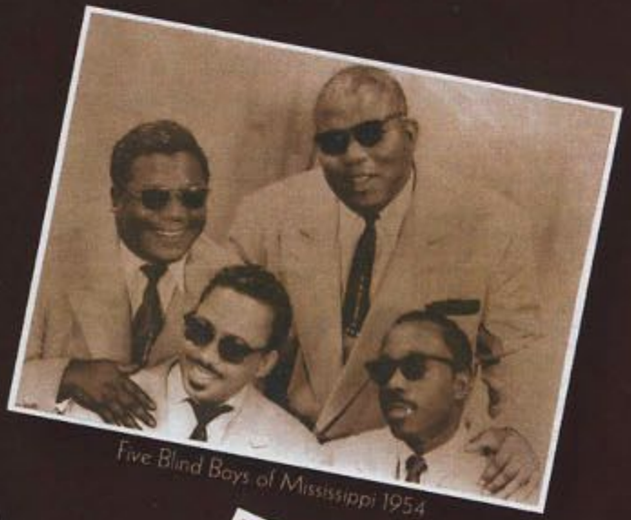
Ellis & Dixon Spiritual & Vocal Group

Windy City Gospel

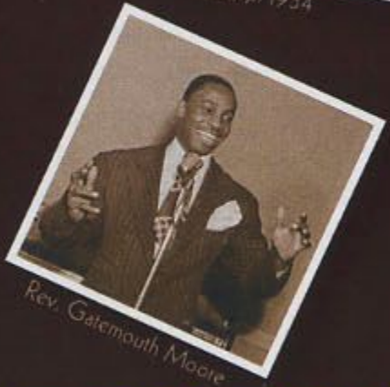
on South Cottage Grove

1947 – 1959

Rev. Utah Smith



Five Blind Boys of Mississippi 1954



Rev. Gatemouth Moore

Windy City Wonders: Gospel on South Cottage Grove (1947-1959) By Opal Louis Nations

CD #1, Tracks 1 & 2: Famous Blue Jay Singers

The Famous Blue Jays of Jefferson County, Alabama were first formed by basso Clarence "Tooter" Parnell from the Woodwards Big Four and tenor Silas Steele of the Pilgrim Singers in 1926. In a matter of a few years the Blue Jays had become one of Birmingham's most challenging jubilee quartets. Other founding members were tenor Jimmie Hollingsworth and baritone Charlie Beal. This group recorded for Paramount in January 1932. The material was reissued by Varsity and Joe Davis under the Jubilee Male Quartet soubriquet. Decca, Champion and Crown also reissued the Blue Jays' initial work. By 1947 Parnell was gone and Charles Bridges had replaced him. By now they were recording for Harlem and Gotham in Chicago. Two sides from these sessions subsequently ended up on South Cottage Grove. For further details see The Birmingham Quartet Anthology album on Chanka Lanka LP 144, 001/2 (1980).

CD #1, Tracks 3 & 4 / 8 & 9: Rev. Dwight "Gatemouth" Moore

The flamboyant "Gatemouth" was born in Topeka, Kansas in November 1913. After winning an amateur singing contest in 1922 by singing *"My Yiddisher Mama"* he was given a regular broadcast over WIBW, toured throughout Kansas and Nebraska, sang in Kansas City clubs, formed the Four Sharps Quartet in Topeka, joined a carnival and toured the Southlands, appeared with traveling minstrels, a circus and Ida Cox's Darktown Scandals, played clubs and in minstrel shows in Atlanta and Natchez, then with bands in Memphis and Kansas City. He got his recording break in 1945 at Gilmore's Chez Paree singing his self-penned signature song *"I Ain't Mad At You."* After three years singing low-down blues opuses around the country, he experienced a "religious calling" and switched to church music and extolling the bible. His first sides (cut with a small choral unit) were made on South Cottage Grove and are included herein. See Neil Slaven's detailed liner notes to *"Hey, Mr. Gatemouth,"* the Complete King Recordings, West Side CD 100 (2000) for more details.

CD #1, Tracks 5 & 6: Norfolk Singers

George Croffet and The Norfolk Singers are not to be confused with the Norfolk Four who recorded for Gotham and Abbey at just about the same time as Croffet's group recorded on South Cottage Grove. Recordings cut for Stanton and Miss in 1960 are believed to be the same outfit. In 1951 Croffet switched to the Christland Singers and stayed for their entire decade-long survival.

CD #1, Track 7: Robert Anderson

Robert Anderson is perhaps the most skillful Post-war baritone gospel soloist to come out of Chicago. His tones and timbres were rich and without equal. Born in 1919, he sang in church as a child. He joined Roberta Martin's Martin-Frye Quartet in 1933. The unit became the all-male Roberta Martin Singers in 1936. The group nurtured many fine soloists. Apart from Anderson, the squad was composed of Eugene Smith, Willie Webb, James Lawrence and Norsalus McKissick. By 1947, the time of their first recordings for Fidelity, Robert Anderson and James Lawrence were gone and sopranos Delores Barrett and Sadie Durrah had been added. In 1939 Anderson began singing duets with R.L. Knowles and wound up in California where he was taken on as an extra for *"Gone With the Wind."* In 1940 he returned to Chicago and opened a music studio to instruct singers and musicians as well as establish a place to publish his songs. He sang on radio and toured during the mid-Forties before putting together his group, The Gospel Caravan, in 1949. They first recorded for Miracle. Some Miracle sides were reissued on Premium, Federal and on South Cottage Grove. The unit changed names to the Caravans in 1952 when Albertina Walker (who soon took the group away from Anderson) joined the outfit. See Bernice Johnson Reagon's book, *"We'll Understand It Better By and By,"* Smithsonian Press (1992) for further details.

CD #1, Tracks 10 & 11 / 16 & 17: Evangelist Gospel Singers of Alabama

The original Evangelist Singers were Leroy Terry and Willie McEnstry, leads, Willie Banks, baritone, and John Davis, bass. Terry doubled on piano. Not to be confused with the Evangelist Singers of Detroit. Our group's only proven appearances on wax were cut during two sessions at South Cottage Grove during the summer of 1951. Legend has it that they recorded again for a second label in the early 1950s. Banks went on to join the Violinaires (1953), the Flying Clouds of Detroit (1957), the Jackson Southernaires (1964-1969), his own Southernaires (1970), then on to the Messengers. A Malaco Records video was made of Banks' career just before his recent passing.

CD #1, Tracks 12 & 13 / 23 & 24: Four-A-Melody-Men / Seven Melody Men

This group can trace their history back to the 1930s when they were known as the Mound City Jubilee

Quartet of Chicago and recorded for Decca in 1935. Members included Rudolf Allen, first tenor, Frank Bass, tenor, Ernest Golden, baritone, and James Taylor, bass. This group also performed as the Four-A-Melody-Men. Whether the Four-A-Melody-Men of the 1930s included the same line-up as those who recorded on South Cottage Grove in 1947 is not known. My guess is that the Seven Melody Men who also recorded on South Cottage Grove in 1947 were composed of some of the same soldiers. The larger group was Tommy de Bruce, Darris L. Betts, James Williams, Herman B. McFadden, Rudolf Allen, Zack C. Swinney with Ernest J. Golden, manager and guitar. They sang in a sweet, tight harmony and utilized swing leads.

CD #1, Tracks 14 & 15: Spiritual Stars

Nothing is known at all about this all-male vocal group, except that they recorded once at South Cottage Grove in August / September 1951.

CD #1, Tracks 18 & 19: Brewsteraires

This is the group founded in Memphis by gospel songwriter Rev. William Herbert Brewster, born in Sommerville, Tennessee and not the Brewsteraires founded in 1951 in Johnston, South Carolina. As pastor of the East Trigg Church in Memphis, Brewster founded the Brewster Theological Clinic. He wrote the first all-black gospel stage play, *"From Auction to Glory"* in 1941. He founded both the Brewster Singers (an all-female gospel group headed by Queen C. Anderson) and the Brewsteraires (an all-male quartet with a female pianist) in the late 1940s. Both first recorded for Gotham in 1950. The selections here are the Brewsteraires' first known independently recorded sides cut at the Sun studios in September 1951. They were subsequently issued on South Cottage Grove. For further information, go to Dr. Horace Clarence Boyer's book, *"How Sweet the Sound,"* Elliott & Clark (1995).

CD #1, Track 20: Rev. Chambers

Rev. W.M. Chambers of Chicago first recorded for Okeh and Conqueror Records in May 1941, supported by his congregation. Eight or nine songs emerged after which the minister disappeared off the recording scene. Returning in 1951, he cut one single with a female vocal group on South Cottage Grove.

CD #1, Tracks 21 & 22 / 26 & 27 / CD #2, Tracks 5 & 6 / 9 & 10: Southern Stars

This all-male quartet hailed from Richmond, Virginia. Original members included Lin Harris, Doug Harris, Clarence Harley, John Light, Theodore Flemming and John Green. They first recorded at South Cottage Grove during the spring of 1952. They enjoyed more sessions at the same studio producing fifteen known songs in all. Four singles were issued, the first bearing a substitute for the re-issue of their first single. The group recorded for various small labels right up to 1970 when they changed names to the Christianaires.

CD #1, Tracks 24 & 25 / CD #2, Tracks 7 & 8: Elder Charles Beck

Elder Beck waxed more than sixty songs during his studio days for some eight labels taking us from 1930 when he played piano behind Elder Curry at the King Edward Hotel in Jackson, Mississippi, up to his album cut live at The Way of the Cross COGIC in Buffalo in 1956. As troubadouring, singing evangelist, this born-again, Bible-thumping, charismatic preacher appeared in tent revivals and at Holiness churches across the nation. He broadcast over WKBW in Buffalo for more than two decades. His ministry reached out to Ghana and Nigeria, the supposed birthplaces of his parents. He conducted two sessions on South Cottage Grove during January 1953 and March 1954. The first produced the comic *"Wine Head Willie Put That Bottle Down."* In 1956 he went on to record the exciting two-part *"Rock and Roll Sermon"* for Chart Records. From notes for a proposed CD collection on the American Odeon label in Los Angeles.

CD #2, Tracks 1 & 2: Silver Stars

Members included Wesley Harvey, lead, James Bland, baritone, Harold Bates, bass, plus two others. The group was from Richmond, Virginia and members were close friends of Richmond's famous Harmonzing Four with whom they appeared on many programs. They first cut for Hi-Lo in May 1952, then on to South Cottage Grove for one session and one release during the summer of 1953. The outfit was believed to have recorded four songs for Ebenezer Records. They sang and recorded behind Maggie Ingram on Nashboro between 1962 and 1964.

CD #2, Tracks 3 & 4: Rev. Utah Smith

Rev. Smith, the *"Two Wings"* man, was born at the beginning of the last century in Cedar Grove, Louisiana. In 1923 he became a C.O.G.I.C. evangelist. He moved to Shreveport in the late 1920s. By the mid-1930s Smith was accompanying himself on an "amplified" guitar. He was perhaps one of the first sanctified singer/musicians to do so. In June 1944 he recorded the original version of his signature song, *"I Want Two Wings,"* for Regis in New York. A live remake of *"I Got Two Wings"* was recorded at The Two Wing Temple

in New Orleans in 1947. This was followed by a second remake on South Cottage Grove in August 1953. Some half a dozen additional songs were recorded at that time but never released. For more information see Lynn Abbott's excellent monograph, *"I Got Two Wings,"* Case Quarter Books (2008).

CD #2, Track 11: Rev. H.R. Jelks

The Greater White Stone Missionary Baptist Church was founded in 1925 on Chicago's William Avenue. It was pastored by Rev. Major J. Jenkins until 1943. In 1944, Rev. H.R. Jelks took stewardship of the church for two years before moving on to the Mt. Pleasant Baptist. Jelks built a considerable reputation and Mt. Pleasant became a significant place of worship for many years. Jelks' only recordings were cut on South Cottage Grove during 1954 and 1955. Only two singles emerged plus one three-record 78 RPM set of his sermon, *"The Gospel of Jesus Christ,"* the last third of which is included here.

CD #2, Tracks 12 & 13: Rev. Robert Ballinger

Ballinger was born in Cincinnati in 1921 and passed in 1965. A died-in-the-wool sanctified singer and pianist, Ballinger spent several years in Detroit before moving on to Chicago to become assistant to the eminent C.O.G.I.C. minister Bishop J.E. Watley Snr. His blues-like piano stylings effectively helped to sell his early 1960s recordings for Peacock in Houston. He began his recording career in 1955 on South Cottage Grove with blues stalwarts Willie Dixon and Odie Payne on bass and drums. He also cut five songs for United at that time. These were first issued in 1997. After one release billed as Evangelist "Baby" Ballinger for Artistic, he returned to South Cottage Grove to record two sessions in 1961. Nothing was issued.

CD #2, Tracks 14 & 15: Dixieland Singers

Nothing at all is known about the group, except that they cut one release on South Cottage Grove in May 1955.

CD #2, Track 16: Ellis & Dixon Spiritual & Vocal Group

Little is known about this seemingly "roots"-based aggregation with a praise-band style utilizing the piano, bass, trumpet, trombone, sax and vocals. They were a four-member outfit.

CD #2, Tracks 17 & 18: Gospel Wonders

The names of the Gospel Wonders who recorded for Zell Sanders' J & S label in the Bronx in 1957 are unknown. In all likelihood the outfit was founded by Calvin White who sang and recorded with the Abyssinian Baptist Choir on Columbia in 1960. Two of the Zell masters showed up on a South Cottage Grove single in 1957. The Wonders then recorded for Scatt and Rev before signing with Savoy in 1965 when soloist Carl Bean joined the group and became White's songwriting collaborator. For more details on Carl Bean, go to his interesting book, *"I Was Born This Way,"* Simon & Shuster, C. Bean & David Ritz (2010).

CD #2, Track 19: Pilgrim Harmonaires

Nothing is known of this fabulous "shout" group except that they were probably part of a deal that brought the Gospel Wonders to South Cottage Grove.

CD #2, Tracks 20 & 21: The Bells of Joy

Details on the history of this group are well documented in my liner notes to *"The Collection,"* Acrobat CD ACM 4207 (2005). The two selections included here were first recorded in 1955 and issued on Wildcat four years later. They were subsequently reissued on South Cottage Grove.

CD #2, Tracks 22 & 23: 5 Blind Boys of Mississippi

The celebrated 5 Blind Boys of Mississippi had recorded for twelve years on four labels before waxing two sides for the tiny San Antonio-based Marathon label in October 1959. The record was soon re-released on South Cottage Grove. These were Archie Brownlee's last sides. A well-documented history can be found in my liner notes to *"The Five Blind Boys of Mississippi"* double CD, Acrobat 3003 (2006.)

The omissions

We have excluded all the Franklin family material (both male and female) because it has been made readily available elsewhere. Space prevents us from including the songs of Rev. H.R. Jelks. Bad pressings (due to reconstituted shellac) prevent us from using the remaining Robert Anderson sides. We have been unable to turn up a clean enough copy of the underside of the Pilgrim Harmonaires' release of 1956. The missing Rev. Chambers has eluded capture. We realize that we have omitted the Flying Clouds' sides of 1957 and the Southern Echoes' material from 1958 and 1959. We are going with the excuse that all three singles were first issued in the early 1960s.

– Opal Louis Nations, November 2010