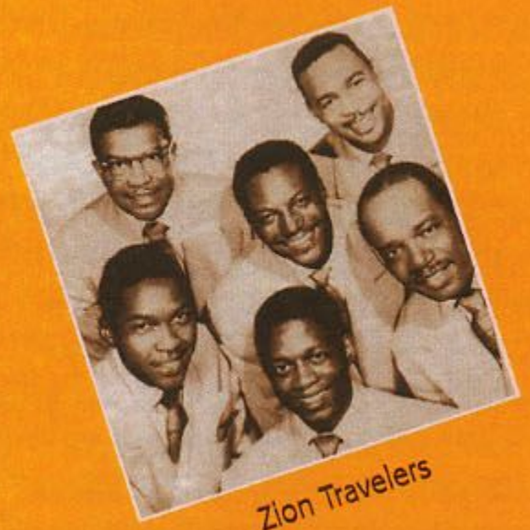
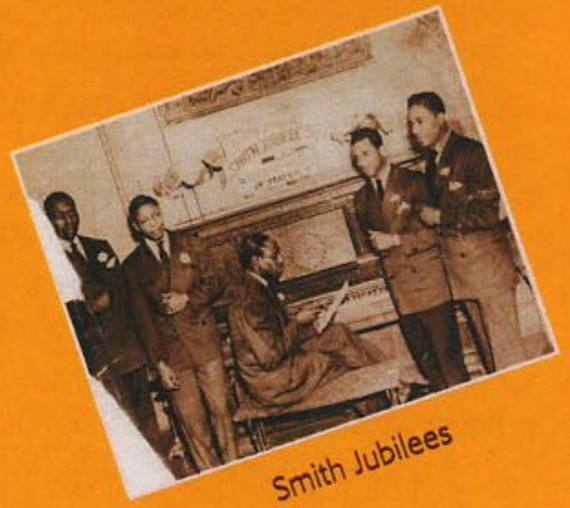


Zion Travelers

Ever Ready Gospel Singers

Kansas City Soul Revivers

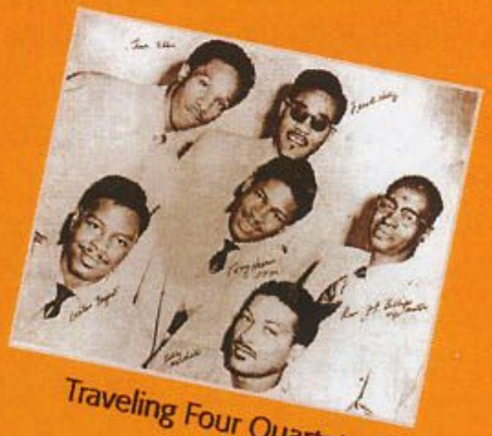


Smith Jubilees

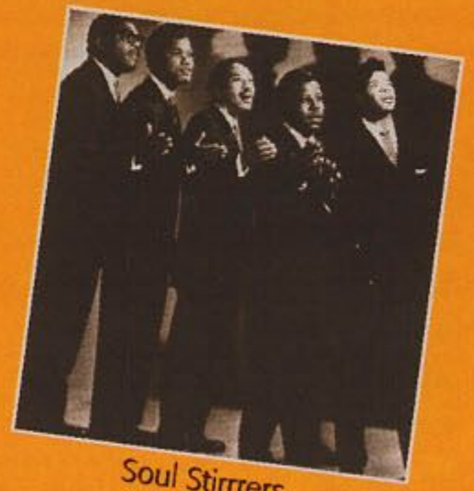
Wings Over the City of Angels

A Los Angeles Gospel Collection

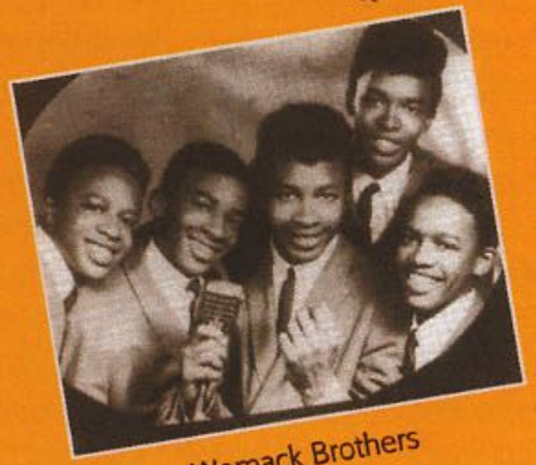
Pilgrim Travelers



Traveling Four Quartet



Soul Stirrrers



Womack Brothers

"Wings Over the City of Angels" – A Los Angeles Gospel Collection

by Opal Louis Nations

Despite racism and bigotry, large numbers of African Americans migrated to California's major coastal cities during the 1920s and 1930s, seeking a better life. Most of these settlers came from Louisiana, Oklahoma and Texas. Migrants from the Deep South tended to favor the more industrialized cities of Detroit and Chicago. The first major influx of black workers to Los Angeles came during the spring of 1942 when the Southern Pacific Railroad Company began importing railroad workers. Shortly thereafter, at the onset of World War II, an increased number flooded in to fill jobs in war plants.

At the same time a parallel trend took place among a few gospel pioneers who took their music out of Chicago to build an extended foundation for it in Los Angeles. Principal among these was John L. Branham who became pastor of St. Paul Baptist Church. The ministry fielded two important choirs, the St. Paul's Choir (also known as The Echoes of Eden), nurtured by pianist, songwriter, arranger Gwen Lightner and soloist Prof. James Earle Hines' and Thurston Frazier's Voices of Hope. Both choirs enjoyed radio exposure and lengthy contracts with Capitol Records. Some of the church's recordings featured Chicago's own Cora Martin and the Sallie Martin Singers. Branham brought others out from Chicago such as Mahalia Jackson and the Caravans to concertize. While Central Avenue became the Mecca for jazz and black popular music, the surrounding areas were dotted with lively storefronts and imposing churches.

One important landmark was the Azusa Street Mission of the early 20th century on Azusa Street, said to be the wellspring of the black Pentecostal movement. The AME denomination, first organized back in 1872, and the Methodist Episcopal followed a little later on. As some blacks gradually became upwardly mobile they tended to turn away from the newer exhibitionist, emotional and more improvisational forms of gospel music, preferring a more conservative "concert spirituals" approach. Consequently, aggregations such as Albert McNeil's Jubilee Singers and Jester Hairston's Hall Johnston's Choir became widely popular among the black middle classes.

Although the featured West Coast Jubilees, Charming Bells, Sweet Singing Cavaleers, Gospel Consolators and others were spawned in Los Angeles, others like the Pilgrim Travelers, Spiritual Five and Chosen Gospel Singers hailed from Texas. The Smith Jubilees originated in St. Louis and both the Ever Readys and Zion Travelers were first formed in Shreveport. The Ohio Wonders started out in Memphis and while the Traveling Four were at first based out of Seattle, the notable Nightingale Jubalaires came out of the San Francisco Bay Area. Los Angeles became the major hub for gospel singers and others because of its proximity to Hollywood, its numerous radio stations, T.V. shows and scattered selection of independent record labels such as Modern, Dolphins, Specialty, Capitol, Andex, Dot, Imperial, Score and Fabor. All recorded gospel and all were situated in the movie capitol.

The Los Angeles environment added a greater degree of promise to those hopefuls who relocated from elsewhere during the late 1950s-early 1960s. Among these were Bessie Griffin, James Cleveland, Clara Ward, Cassietta George and Raymond Rasberry. Los Angeles composers such as Albert A. Goodson, Margaret Pleasant Douroux and Fannie E. Benjamin enjoyed increased notoriety for having their songs demonstrated on radio and on recordings. Bessie Griffin & the Gospel Pearls got as far as appearing on Shindig, Dinah Shore, Danny Kaye, Steve Allen and Ed Sullivan T.V. shows. The most significant artists, for example the Mighty Clouds of Joy and transplants Gospel Harmonettes, Soul Stirrers and 5 Blind Boys of Alabama, became lasting international celebrities.

Space permits just a few words about the four most celebrated groups included here: The Mighty Mighty Clouds of Joy were started in 1955 by Bedile Goldsmith. Goldsmith had previously sung with Tony Harris in the L.A. Spiritual Singers who evolved into the Traveling Four. Goldsmith gathered five promising, young singers without (he discovered) a strong,

standout lead. He soon found one in Willie Joe Ligon who had a good deal of raw talent but little experience. Ligon sang lead in Goldsmith's Mighty Mighty Clouds of Joy for five years. The group performed locally under the guidance of Prof. Joe Henderson, border station deejay and proprietor of Proverb / Gospel Corner Records. Many notable singers passed fleetingly through the group during this time such as Tony Harris and Clay Hammond. The group split up in 1959. That same year a second quartet going as the Sensational Clouds of Joy recorded for Elko Records. This outfit evolved into the Sensational Wonders. Members at this time included Joe Ligon, Ermant Franklin, Elmer Franklin, Leon Polk, David Walker and guitarist Richard Wallace who had sung tenor and played in the Alpha-Omega Singers and Stars of Bethlehem.

The Sensational Wonders cut one record for Fabor. They then picked up David Walker and Johnny Martin (Martin had previously sung in the original Mighty Mighty Clouds of Joy.) In September 1960, this seven-member second group calling themselves the Mighty Mighty Clouds of Joy recorded for Peacock Records at Goldstar studios in Houston. In 1961 they dropped one "Mighty" from their name. The release of their first Peacock album, "Family Circle" cut in 1962-1963, set them on the path to enormous success, culminating in an enormous winner's cup for becoming "Top Male Gospel Quartet" of 1967. Fresh, younger members keep the group working today.

The Soul Stirrers date all the way back to 1926 with tenor founder Silas Roy Crain in the town of Trinity, Texas. Crain organized and trained a bunch of teenagers to sing Jubilee style gospel songs at the Mount Pilgrim Baptist Church, but the young men tended to graduate and move away to college. This made it impossible to train a group long enough to bring them up to a professional standard. Around 1932 Crain went to work in a rice mill in Houston where he met up with Walter Le Beaux and his New Pleasant Grove Singers. Crain was asked to train and sing with the boys. Crain agreed to sign up on condition they change names to the Soul Stirrers, the appellation of his former group. Members included Le Beaux, first tenor, Crain utility, Ernest R. Rundless, 2nd tenor, A.L. Johnson, baritone, and O.W. Thomas, bass. The group recorded for the Library of Congress in Austin, Texas in February, 1936.

By 1939 the yodeling, shape-note singing Robert H. Harris had replaced Le Beaux, Mozel Franklin had replaced A.L. Johnson and Jesse J. Farley had stepped in to fill Thomas's spot. The outfit had changed names from the Five Soul Stirrers of Houston to simply the Five Soul Stirrers. By now they were recording for Bronze Records in Los Angeles. In 1946 they were recording for Bronze with a six-man line-up. They had added baritones Thomas L. Bruster and R.B. Robinson and had dropped tenor Ernest Rundless.

More line-up switches came in 1945 when the group waxed for Ebony as the Five Gospel Souls. A longer-lasting line-up came together when the group went with Aladdin as the Soul Stirrers. The singers had moved from Houston to Chicago during the War. Although the group spent most of their lives touring the nation, their recording base became Specialty Records of Hollywood. They signed with the label in 1950. The ethereal Rebert H. Harris and sanctified baritone Paul Foster Snr were sparring first and second leads. The group became one of the gospel circuit's most beloved quartets.

The equally exquisite but stylistically dissimilar Sam Cooke replaced Harris in early 1951. The Cooke-sounding Johnny Taylor replaced Sam in 1958. By 1959 the Soul Stirrers had switched to Sar Records (Sam Cooke's own label.) Taylor had crossed over to the more lucrative Devil's Music by September, 1960 and was replaced by the irascible Jimmy Outler. Outler was joined by second lead tenor James Phelps in 1964. Both were graduates of the Sam Cooke School of gospel soul. At this point the group was composed of Phelps, Outler, Farley, Richard Gibbs and Leroy Crume, baritone, arranger, and guitarist. The Sar sides marked the close of the Soul Stirrers' "glory days" although the Checker sides, beginning in 1965 with Little Willie Rogers and Martin Jacox at the helm cut some remarkably rewarding sides despite the onward march towards the inevitable fluid personnel changes and musical transitions.

The Gospel Harmonettes were started in Birmingham, Alabama by pianist, composer and arranger Evelyn Starks in 1940. Starks, with prompting from soprano Mildred Madison Miller, gathered up second alto Odessa Glasgow Edwards, Vera Conner Kolb, first soprano, and Willie Mae Brooks Newberry, first alto. They named themselves the Gospel Harmoneers. Discovering that Billy Bunn headed up a group similarly called the Gospel Harmonaires of Portsmouth, Va., they switched names to the more feminine-sounding Original Gospel Harmonettes. With the Gaston Funeral Homes as sponsor the Harmonettes landed a weekly thirty-minute radio show on WSGN. The girls toured Alabama and neighboring states and gained much acclaim. They often opened for nationally known touring groups.

While in New Orleans they were noticed by RCA Victor who had a branch office in the city. The group was taken to New York in June 1949 and two recording sessions were completed on the same day. Mildred Miller sang lead on most of the charts. Their reputation reached the ears of J.W. Alexander, Pilgrim Travelers' tenor and talent scout for Specialty. At the Specialty signing they decided to take on Dorothy McGriff (Love) Coates, their occasional "reserve" soloist who sang with them out on the road in the pre-RCA days. After listening to Dorothy's ragged and painfully raw but sanctified singing Alexander and Art Rupe, the label's proprietor, decided to have her lead the group on most of their sides.

Dorothy's first effort, "Get away Jordan," was an immediate spirit-killer and the first in a long line of similar odes to anguish. With Joe Washington in place of Evelyn Starks they waxed for Andex in 1958. Mildred, Dorothy and Odessa shared lead vocals equally at this point. Members of the Gospel Harmonettes with little change of personnel sang as a unit almost up to present times.

The Five Blind Boys of Alabama date back to 1937 when lead tenor Clarence Fountain attended the Talladega Institute for the Deaf and Blind's elementary school. Fountain was a member of the Glee Club as was bass singer and friend Johnny Fields. The pair selected baritone Olice Thomas and tenor Velma Bozman Traylor from among the Glee club singers to form the Happyland Singers. They were devout fans of the Golden Gate Quartet whose nationally syndicated radio program was never missed by the boys at the school. The Happyland Singers borrowed songs from the Gates' repertoire and added a few hymns and spirituals of their own. As fund-raising representatives of the Deaf and Blind School, they sang at churches and social functions around Talladega, Tuskegee and Birmingham.

In 1944 the group decided to leave school and go out as professionals. At one point Paul Exkano who had a degree of professional experience led the group. By now Velma Bozman Traylor had dropped out of the group. Exkano's old-style Jubilee singing is heard on most of the leads on the Four Blind Boys or Happyland Singers' initial recordings for Coleman in April 1948. With the move to Gospel Records in 1950 the Rev. George W. Warren was added to create a more sanctified sound. By this point Clarence Fountain had gained enough skill and confidence to navigate half of the quartet's lead singing. His tough delivery and dramatic exuberance took gospel expression into a more dramatic realm of shout singing.

By mid-1953 and the completion of the group's second Specialty session, Exkano had gone and Fountain had moved up to first tenor with Warren in the second lead spot. In April 1958 the Blind boys of Alabama hooked up with L.A.'s Andex Records. Here both Fountain and Rev. Samuel K. Lewis shared lead chores. But the group's L.A. stop was brief as the boys opted to go with Savoy in New York. The Blind Boys of Alabama are performing today without Clarence Fountain who refuses to stray too far from his spiritual roots.

As with our liner note word limits, CD space permits only a cursory cross-section of L.A. gospel talent. I hope that some time in the not so distant future we will be able to paint a larger canvas by adding a second double volume.

– Opal Louis Nations, June 2012