

HT CD 11

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17. MY LORD AND I
18. YES MY JESUS CARES
19. THIS SAME JESUS
20. BREAD OF HEAVEN
21. ONLY A LOOK
22. GOD'S ROLL

Angelic Gospel Singers (Margaret Allison, Lucille Shird, Josephine McDowell, Ella Mae Norris) vocals, Margaret Allison piano: with occasional accompaniment by Doc Bagby organ, unknown drums and chimes. On tracks 10, 11, 12 they are joined by the Dixie Hummingbirds (James Davis, Ira Tucker, Beachey Thompson, William Bobo, Ernest James) vocals. 1949-1955.

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# ANGELIC GOSPEL SINGERS

## *Touch Me Lord Jesus*



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Philadelphia during the 50s had become a hotbed of dynamic black female gospel talent. While headliners like the Ward Singers and the Davis Sisters tore up churches, the renowned Angelic Gospel Singers enjoyed lasting popularity and nationwide success. Tony Heilbut states in his book *The Gospel Sound* (Doubleday Press, 1971) that The Angelics are a simple, down-homey act whose approach hasn't changed in twenty years and whose records are seldom played in New York or Chicago. The latter might have been so twenty years ago but today The Angelics are as widely well received as ever and have made many fans during almost constant touring throughout the U.S. and Europe.

The 71-year-old founder, manager, and pianist Margaret Allison was born in McCormick, South Carolina some fifty miles north of Augusta, GA. Her parents, Mazel and Joseph Wells, moved the family to Philly when Margaret was four years old. The youngster's parents attended the Little Temple Pentecostal Church. The wee Margaret soon took up piano and was playing in public by age twelve. "The strongest influence on my playing back then was Valerie Starks," Margaret states. Attending church in North Philly, Margaret became a member of the acclaimed B.M. Oakley Memorial Temple (the chorus with which the former Ward Singer Marion Williams cut records for Atlantic during the 70s).

In 1942, Margaret served a two-year stint with The Spiritual Echoes Chorus. Other members of the aggregation included her sister, Josephine McDowell, the late Lucille Shird from Ashville, S.C. and the late Ella Mae Norris from Greenville, S.C. Lucille and Ella Mae were both members of the Mount Zion Pentecostal Church in Philly.

In 1944, Margaret asserts she had a dream of forming her own group. Together with her sister she approached Lucille and Ella Mae who both immediately consented to membership, and the original Angelic Gospel Singers were born. "We traveled locally during this time, playing churches as far south as our own home towns."

Some time during 1947, gospel promoter-singer-songwriter Otis Jackson heard the quartet, was impressed, and introduced them to Ivin Ballen who acquired the indie Gotham label in January 1948. Margaret emphatically states that she recorded "Touch me, Lord Jesus" back in 1947. If this is correct, the group must have re-recorded the song in March 1949 (the date of the first known Gotham session), as the birth of Ballen's new all-gospel 600-series did not come about until January of that year with the release of "In the upper room" by The Famous Blue Jay Singers. When "Touch me, Lord Jesus" (the group's initial release) was put out in May 1949, it became an instant success, selling somewhere in the many thousands. Even Ernie Young (of Ernie's Record Mart fame) used the tune as a signature for his regular gospel program. The song, with its strong concerted vocals and almost military-like rhythmic accompaniment, was a more assertive arrangement of Lucy Campbell's staid original chart. In November, Margaret received a call from the extremely irate Ballen. "You have to fly to Knoxville, Tennessee," he ordered. "Rosetta Tharpe is cashing in on your name and is stealing our songs." A December 1949 Billboard article affirms that Ballen had filed a federal suit against Dave Taps of the Taps Agency (Rosetta's booking agency) charging that The Rosettes, Tharpe's group, had used unacceptable assertions on their billboards, tagging themselves "the former Angelic Queens" (which caused undue confusion) and utilizing two of the Angelics' own songs for their promotion. Taps eventually backed down but The Rosettes covered "Jesus" (The Angelics' second release) on Decca in late 1949.

"When my Savior calls me home" has a distinct Davis Sisters/Ward Singers feel – no doubt all three borrowed nuances from each other. Ruth and The Davis Sisters certainly did record a version of "Jesus" (Precious King) and unlike Ruth's rasping wails, The Angelics' reading convincingly sticks to the staccato chording style of their earlier success. "There is no friend," with its exciting revivalist approach is one of the group's finest earlier efforts.

By late 1950, Ballen was using overdub techniques on his gospel sides. The Doc Bagby Trio was hired as the in-studio sessions group and can be heard on The Angelics' first overdub session which took place in the spring of 1949. The session produced "Back to the dust," a jumping foot tapper in The Wards' vein. "He never has left me alone" again demonstrates the concerted effort of four strong-group of singers as opposed to upfront lead treatment. (In The Angelics, all were equal. Solo primadonnaing was not a concern.)

"Glory glory to the newborn King" is a Christmas gospel song sung in Angelic fashion, with Doc Bagby's nice organ solo at the bridge. "All to Jesus" with its interesting harmonies holds to a traditional approach. On "Keep me all the way" Margaret is in peak form as she competes wildly with the solid rhythmic accompaniment. For three years, covering the 1950-53 period, The Angelics traveled with Philly's world famous Dixie Hummingbirds (whose lead throughout the 50s and on, James Walker, just passed on.) "As we were used to singing together on the road, it was only natural for us to record with them," asserts Margaret. On "Dear Lord, look down upon me," Margaret and Ira Tucker trade lyrics and without resorting to any duet-like approach rely on individual licks to carry the song.

"Standing out on the highway" adheres to the same format but lead chores are shared three ways as the song reaches ever-dizzying heights. A classic and in every way one of the group's finest waxings, "Glory, glory hallelujah" gives vent to no less than five alternating lead soloists and should have been allowed to go to two parts as the song builds but does not continue long enough to squeeze out all possible energy.

In 1952, between yearly contract renewals with Ballen, The Angelics/Dixie Hummingbirds group was persuaded by Danny Kessler to record for Okeh. On the Okeh December 1951 session, the impressive vocal pipes of Bernice Cole is added to lead the distaff, while in "The Birds," Ernest James having left the group joins The Sensational Nightingales and is replaced by Swan Siivertones stalwart Paul Owens who shares workouts with Ira and Bernice on this one and only release. The Angelics chose to renew their Gotham contract thereafter and "The Birds" were lured away by Don Robey to Peacock Records in Houston.

With "Call on Jesus in secret prayer," we hear The Angelics back in true form with Margaret perfecting her rather unique piano style. "Tell the angels" is a jubilatory chant, sung with firm conviction as the tempo quickens and hand-bashing heats up. Beautiful harmonies prevail on the touching "My faith looks up to you," an unusual but delightful change of mood and style for the quartet. "If Jesus goes with me" is Angelics down to the last note with its stabbing piano figures and tight, brisk harmonies. Back to that old time religion with the group's treatment of "My Lord and I," belted out with joyous passion. One of this collection's highlights is The Angelics' reading of "Yes my Jesus cares," a Kenneth Morris gem performed with unbridled confidence. This same "Jesus," an H. J. Ford composition, is as rootsy as pre-war congregational singing and The Angelics sing it that way.

"Bread from Heaven" is yet another cleffing done Wardishly – even the singing could easily be mistaken for Clara's group. "Only a look" is one of the last compositions recorded by the group for Gotham and sounds as true to tradition as any earlier song. The song-fest ends appropriately with "God's role," the calling of the saved to the land of God with the peal of bells.

During 1955, The Angelics signed with Chess Records of Chicago. "It was all Stan Lewis's doing. We were at Stan's Record Mart in Shreveport and he helped cut the deal for us. But Ernie Young, who had always wanted us to record for his Nashboro label, later made an offer to the Chess brothers and bought out our contract," says Margaret. So began a lasting relationship with Nashboro which continued on almost to the present.

With sister Josephine in poor health, Margaret is the only original member currently touring in The Angelic Gospel Singers, one of the most consistent and staunchly traditional vocal groups in active service, a group who helped shape the sound of post-war gospel quartet singing and who greatly influenced the making of the "Philadelphia sound."

OPAL LOUIS NATIONS  
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Based on an interview with Margaret Allison.