



The Barrett Sisters

by Opal Louis Nations

The central focus of the dynamic Barrett Sisters is soprano church-wrecker Delois Barrett Campbell. Delois was born in Chicago in 1926 to Susie and Deacon Lonnie Barrett, a staunch Baptist from Hickory, Mississippi. Delois and sisters contralto Billie Greenbay and soprano Rhodessa Porter spent a good deal of their childhood singing around the house and in the choir of The Morning Star Baptist Church at 3991 South Park Boulevard on Chicago's South Side. In 1936, under the direction of an aunt, choir director Mattie Dacus, the trio teamed up with a cousin named Johnnie Mae Hudson and sang local engagements billed as The Barrett and Hudson Singers. Dropping the Hudson a little later on, the family group simply became known as The Barrett Sisters.

The sisters attended Englewood High, and while in her senior year, Delois was recruited by the renowned Roberta Martin Singers. In the book, "We'll understand it better by and by" edited by Bernice Johnson Reagon (Smithsonian Press, 1992), Delois in her own words tells of how this came about. "When I was in my early teens, my aunt (Mattie) was the senior directress of the gospel choir I sang in at Central Baptist Church on State Street. Norselus McKissick was the junior director." (McKissick was also tenor singer in the famous Roberta Martin Singers.) "McKissick asked me to sing 'He will remember me.'" McKissick was impressed and invited Roberta Martin along to the choir's annual monthly musical. Roberta was thrilled with the neo-operatic qualities of Delois's voice and asked if she would like to join The Roberta Martin Singers and rehearse right away at The Martin Studios at 1308 E. 47th Street. Delois sang with The Roberta Martin Singers during the summer vacation and fell behind with her schoolwork. Roberta served as a friend, sister, and mother to the young, impressionable Delois. Deacon Lonnie Barrett disapproved of Delois going on

the road with a gospel group but tolerated his daughter's attachment to the troupe. Before joining The Roberta Martin Singers on a permanent basis in 1944, Delois graduated from high school. Rhodessa moved to Gary, Indiana and became the choir director at the Galileo Baptist Church, and Billie studied voice at the American Music Conservatory and became a church soloist.

The Roberta Martin Singers were among the most widely traveled of all gospel groups of the 1940s and 1950s. Prior to their retirement in the mid-1960s (Roberta passed in 1969), the singers had sung to unanimous critical acclaim in major concert halls, stadiums, churches, and at festivals, as well as on radio and t.v., both in the States and in Europe. For her material Roberta re-arranged music by notable classical composers as well as performed the work of popular African-American songwriters. During wartime Delois and the group traveled up and down the country on special clergymen's passes. Tony Heilbut in his book *The Gospel sound* (Limelight Editions, 1974) states that the singers could earn over three thousand dollars a week for a revival service in California in 1945.

By 1947, The Roberta Martin Singers were cutting vanity recordings in Chicago and selling or leasing out the masters to small record companies, targeting those based on the West Coast. In 1947, The Roberta Martin Singers were composed of Roberta, contralto and piano, Barrett, McKissick, Eugene Smith, and Willie Webb, baritones, plus the occasional Sadie Durrah. Two strong releases appeared on Art Rupe's Specialty subsidiary, Fidelity Records, after which Delois made a stunning recording debut with her interpretation of Horatio Palmer's "Yield not to temptation," recently made available on a New World collection.

After leasing material to John Dolphin at Dolphin's of Hollywood, the group signed with Carl Lebow at Apollo Records. Three releases later, the group recorded "The Old Ship of Zion" with McKissick taking lead. The record became a monster success and by August 1952 had won the group a gold record plaque. The plaque was awarded in New York with much fanfare by Carl Lebow and Nora Holt, gospel music editor for *The Amsterdam News*. The group continued to record for Apollo up to the close of 1956.

The Roberta Martin Singers signed a long-term contract with Herman Lubinsky at Savoy Records in January 1957. In April, the group played a gig for an estimated six hundred inmates of the Cook County Jail Chapel as part of a public service program. By now the group consisted of Martin, Barrett, McKissick and Smith plus soprano / pianist "Little" Lucy Smith from The Lucy Smith Singers (who waxed for the States label in 1955), Gloria Griffin from out of the famous Caravans plus Romance Watson who had sung in his family group, The Watson Singers, during the 1940s.

In April 1958, Billboard announced the signing of major Savoy gospel talent (this included The Roberta Martin Singers) to radio station WLIB in New York. WLIB had seventy affiliates who broadcast gospel around the country on Sunday mornings sponsored by Pet Milk and hosted by the silky voice of Chicago's gospel poet and actor, Sid McCoy. In 1959, The Roberta Martin Singers were featured on "The World's Greatest Gospel Caravan" held at the Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles. Delois sang soprano lead on "Jesus will hear you pray" recorded for Savoy in April 1959, just about the last time she took the studio spotlight—from then on she chose to stay in the background.

The break with The Roberta Martin Singers took place toward the close of 1961. It was around this juncture that Delois made a solo guest appearance on "TV Gospel Time," sponsored by Feenamint. With Roberta's encouragement, The Barrett

Sisters, now all back in Chicago, got together and started rehearsing once more as a trio. By April 1964, The Barrett Sisters, through Fred Mendelsohn, were signed to Savoy Records in New Jersey and issued the first of three albums spanning a three-year period. Through Savoy Records, The Barrett Sisters' fame spread like brush fire, and their vocal blend earned them the name "The Sweet Sisters of Zion."

Touring took The Barrett Sisters to the far corners of the world. Back home they played locations from Washington's Ford's Theatre and Chicago's Civic Opera House to San Francisco's Cow Palace. In 1982, The Barrett Sisters starred (along with Thomas A. Dorsey and Willie Mae Ford "Mother Smith") in George T. Nierenberg's movie "Say Amen, Somebody," a documentary on the development of African-American gospel music in Chicago.

The group's t.v. exposure has included The Oprah Winfrey and Tonight Shows. Today, Greenbay works as a secretary, Rhodessa Porter is employed in a bank, and Delois makes ends meet singing for a local funeral parlor. Although arthritic in both knees and confined to a wheelchair, Delois still finds enough courage and spirit to call the gals together and whisk them away on yet another tour of Europe, much to the delight of their many legions of fans.

— Opal Louis
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