

Big Henry Johnson



Five Blind Boys of Mississippi circa 1962. Back row: Big Henry Johnson, (lead tenor); Bobby Jackson (guitar); Rev. Willie Mincey (2nd lead tenor); Front Row: Lloyd Woodward (baritone); Jimmy Carter (tenor); Jay T. Clinkscales (bass). Courtesy Opal Louis Nations

In the words of Marcel Smith, lead singer with Sacramento's long-established WD Gospel Singers, Big Henry Johnson is the last of the great quartet leads who never, to this day, received his dues. This article serves, in part, to make up for this by telling the big man's long and illustrious history. Intelligent, congenial, gentlemanly and possessed of a sharp inner wisdom, Big Henry is able to keep his fine five-octave voice rested and intact by spending frequent measures of time at his favourite fishing holes. "I never run myself ragged," he says, "and I always make sure I get a lot of rest. That's the key," he adds.

Big Henry, who switches easily from tenor to contra-tenor to baritone, can with ease control his instrument as well as any fully seasoned opera singer. In fact, his early training prepared him for just that. Born in 1929 in Orange, Texas, east of Houston on the Texas-Louisiana border, Johnson grew up in a church environment. His father, Rev. Henry Johnson Snr., was the pastor of Orange's Starlight Baptist Church. Rev. Johnson's wife, Fanny, was commonly regarded as first lady of the parish. Big Henry attended Wallace Public High School where he fell under the spell of music teacher Melrose Brooks who, Big

Henry insists, was one of the most skilled and articulate music tutors in the state. Brooks ran the school Glee Club and had the great concert tenor from Curryville, Georgia, Roland Hayes, come sing for the school. Big Henry was learning 'Without A Song,' a chart first introduced by baritone Lois Deppe with Russell Wooding's Jubilee Singers in 1931. "Hayes came into our class and taught me to sing 'Without a song' in

falsetto voice," says Big Henry. The event made a deep and lasting impression. Big Henry wound up as Starlight's superintendent of Sunday School, which meant he had to teach and supervise Sunday School class every week.

One of Fanny Johnson's brothers, Paul Francis, sang in a gospel outfit called the Southern Selah Quartet, who enjoyed a regular weekly Sunday radio broadcast over KOGT in Orange (10:00 am -10:45 am). The Southern Selahs moved and inspired Big Henry, so it did not take much persuasion to have him join the group. The Southern Selahs, composed of Leroy King, Paul Francis, Robert Jackson, Marcel McAllister, and now Big Henry Johnson, toured church venues throughout East Texas and Western Louisiana on long weekends away from home.

Big Henry learned much about the finer points of quartet singing from Francis, staying with the Southern Selahs for three or four years. Soon he was ready to strike out on his own and relocated to Port Arthur, the first major city south of Orange. In Port Arthur, Big Henry hooked up with the Silver Wings - Fonzo Martin, David (?), Sipion and Alfred Como. By now, Big Henry was proficient enough to share in singing all parts, except bass. The Silver Wings travelled extensively throughout

The Last of the Great Gospel Shouters by Opal Louis Nations

Texas and Louisiana. Big Henry stayed with the group off and on for many years, during which time he also served in the Army.

After National Service, Big Henry sang for a brief spell in both the Four Internes and Harmonising Four. The Four Internes, lead by Alonzo E. Eubands, were based in North Carolina and pitched a tight-knit style akin to jubilee. Their best remembered recordings were made for Syd Nathan's King label out of Cincinnati during the early 1950s. Big Henry's tenure was short, and consequently he never recorded with them. Big Henry states that he was then a sweet-singing, disciplined vocalist, a devotee of the lustrous pipes of Sam Cooke, and thought he would fit right in with the finely polished, soulfully rendered harmonies of Richmond, Virginia's own world famous Harmonising Four, but they were difficult to work with, and things did not quite pan out.

After Silver Wings' manager and soloist Alfred Como died, the group broke up. "It was then," says Big Henry, "that the Sensational Wonders came and picked me up." The hard-singing Sensational Wonders, based in Los Angeles, eventually evolved into the Mighty Clouds of Joy. Big Henry made the decision to sing "shout gospel" as opposed to a softer approach. The original Sensational Wonders were composed of David Walker, Jr. Franklin, Elmer Franklin, Curtis Grant, Clarence Devereau and guitarist Richard Wallace from the Stars of Bethel. Leon Polk joined later on.

Things were going well for Big Henry and the Sensational Wonders until Willie Joe Ligon came along. Ligon, who had sung in Brother Duke Henderson's Proverb label-recorded original Mighty Clouds of Joy (alongside Jerome Brown, Johnny Martin, Bedile Goldsmith, Freddie Johnson, Johnnie Wesley and Johnnie Gibson) had made at least one record with the Sensational Wonders for Fable Records on Sunset Boulevard ('Somebody Touched Me' / 'Walk Around My Lord'). Big Henry and Ligon, both strong shout-singers, did not get along. "Because of Ligon, I was only getting half split pay," says Big Henry. Intense rivalry led to a reshuffle in the line-up of the Sensational Wonders. Grant and Devereau were dropped and Ligon with the Franklins, Walker, Wallace, Polk and Johnny Martin (from the original Mighty Clouds of Joy) went with Peacock Records after sending demos to Don Robey in Houston. The group then permanently changed names to the Mighty Clouds of Joy.

Big Henry went on to sing with the Sims Brothers, Bobbie and Kenny, for awhile. The Sims Brothers were from Elba, Louisiana, in St. Landry County. After moving to L.A. and splitting with the family sextet, Bobbie and Kenny, calling themselves the Silver Twins, formed a gospel duo. The Silver Twins played concerts with the Mighty Clouds of Joy, but this was after Big Henry's brief tenure with the couple. Bobbie and Kenny crossed over to soul music at Sam Cooke's insistence, and in June 1961 they recorded the hit selling 'Soothe Me', as the Simms Twins for Cooke's Sar label. In 1964, Big Henry was asked by baritone Lloyd Woodard to come sing in the Jackson Harmonisers, a.k.a. the Five Blind Boys of Mississippi. At this point, the group had enlisted the services of lead tenor Rev. Willie Mincey. Mincey had replaced Lawrence Abrams, whom the group had accused of clowning around too much on stage. Other soldiers included tenor Jimmy Carter (who joined a few months after Big Henry), Jay T. Clinkscales, bass, Bobby Jackson, guitar, and legendary lead baritone/tenor Roscoe Robinson. "Not wanting to go through the same petty jealousy I had encountered with Joe Ligon, I approached Robinson and asked whether he had any problems with me being in the group," says Big Henry. "No problems," said Robinson. "We have no rivalries in the Blind Boys."

Both Robinson and Big Henry worked up their own songs for the next studio session with the group. When it came time to record, Big Henry was ready, but Robinson was not. Robinson was using stall tactics to voice his displeasure at having Big Henry in his group, sharing his spot. As a result, Robinson departed. He went on to sing in the Clefs of Calvary as James Phelps' replacement. Then he disappeared for awhile after that.

Amazingly, up to this point, Big Henry had made few, if any, recordings. In late 1964, at Don Robey's Peacock studios in Houston, confident and in full control, Big Henry cut his first sides with the Blind Boys of Mississippi. The label's primary release found 'Just a Little While' coupled with 'Servant's Prayer'. 'Just A Little While' is a fast-moving, church-stirring song accompanied by Clinkscales' pumping bass and Jackson's stopped chords. The song, for the first time, highlights Big Henry's trademark shriek, which in those days came at you with deafening strength. Big Henry screamed with his voice, not with his throat. Like some gospel singers, he was able to compress air at the back of his mouth and use it without wearing his throat. In that way, the singer does not wreck his voice, as did Rev. Julius Cheeks and his secular heir apparent, Wilson Pickett, who were not adept at Big Henry's form of "trickeration."

Big Henry was also able to sing in high tenor and edge this with a squeal simultaneously, a trick only a few could master. One of these was the great Archie Brownlee, whom Roscoe Robinson replaced in the Blind Boys. Lloyd Woodard favoured Big Henry over Robinson because the former could use his voice the same way Brownlee used his. Brownlee died prematurely in 1960. 'Servant's Prayer' is a tough, hard

adaptation of the traditional spiritual 'Servant's Prayer, Amen.'

Big Henry's second release was topped with 'Something To Shout About,' another church rocker guaranteed to get the sisters' feet stepping out a holiness dance. The flip, 'Leaning On Jesus,' is a more complex update of the screaming and hollering 'Leaning On The Everlasting Arm' original, etched in wax by Archie Brownlee in 1959. The difference between this and the remake is that the opening narration on the remake is rendered by Woodard instead of Brownlee and that the spontaneous rhythmic clapping so effective on the original has been dropped. Nevertheless, Big Henry gives the tune his customary hot poked brand of approval.

The group's third single release is indeed Big Henry's finest recorded work of art. His remake of Brownlee's 1958 Vee Jay original of 'In The Hands Of The Lord' surpasses Brownlee's through brute strength and majesty of voice. Big Henry takes the song straight to paradise on the end of a string of fantastic screams, each more elastic than the last. 'In The Hands Of The Lord' is one of the finest gospel canvasses of the mid Sixties. Why the song was excluded from the Blind Boys' only album release of 1965 ('Father I Stretch My Hands To Thee' - Peacock PLP 113), is a mystery to everyone. The single's underside was entitled 'Lift The Saviour Up,' another rollicking, full-throttled pewburner.

On the heels of the third single release came the aforementioned Blind Boys album, with standouts like the title track, 'Father, I Stretch My Hands To Thee' with its soul-searing sermon, and hard, gritty singing, the liltingly beautiful 'Time Is Winding Up', the touching, gloomy ballad 'Oh Why' (first made popular by Brownlee on Vee Jay Records in 1956), the powerhouse rafter-scorching 'Jesus Rose', plus a devastating remake of Archie Brownlee's 'Where There's A Will' and 'Waiting At The River'.

Gospel fans were now made fully aware that Big Henry Johnson was the living resurrection of Archie Brownlee's musical spirit and all who heard Big Henry sing marvelled at his dynamic, wide-reaching, sometimes tough, sometimes tender, vocal vocabulary. After a truly magnificent appearance on TV Gospel Time alongside the Barrett Sisters with Roberta Martin at the piano and the Thompson Community Choir of Chicago, the Blind Boys of Mississippi were asked by German concert promoter Horst Lippman (of Lippman & Rau) to headline a European tour which would take in England, France, Germany and Holland. Lucky travel mates included Inez Andrews and the Andrewettes, Sister Lena Phillips, John Little and Bishop Kelsey from Washington D.C.

In Bremen, the entire aggregation was recorded for Fontana Records. Additional documentation was made on video. When the gospel package reached English shores, yours truly was fortunate enough to be invited along with the artists on the tour bus. The caravan played London and a few select northern cities. My duties were to help carry luggage and equipment, be guide for the three blind members of the Blind Boys, and keep the performers' spirits up by sharing day-to-day experiences with them. In exchange, I got a week's worth of free room and board plus many fond memories of sharing time with Liz Dargen and Big Henry. With little provocation, Big Henry demonstrated the



The Mighty Clouds of Joy with lead singer Joe Willie Ligon, bottom row, far right. Photo courtesy Ray Funk.



L.A. Harps Of Joy. Back Row: Big Henry Johnson, Bob Johnson (lead tenors); front Row: Sam Esters and Willie Crawford; George Chambers of the Chambers Brothers - tenor and bass guitar (not shown). Photo: Opal Louis Nations.

numbing decibel amplitude of his awesome pipes. Sad to say, Liz Dargen, linchpin and guiding light of the Andrewettes, was brutally murdered and dismembered some few years later.

Even though awarded the honour of being top quartet for 1965, things did not go too well after the Blind Boys of Mississippi returned to the States. Big Henry was constantly accused of being arrogant and overbearing. As chief devil-slayer with the Blind Boys, he wrecked churches everywhere they went. During off-hours, Jackson and Mincey just wanted to chase the women and would often take off with the car. This angered Big Henry who sometimes wanted to borrow the wheels for a fishing trip. God help anyone who got in the way of Big Henry's fishing expeditions. The end came after a performance in Texas.

Big Henry went out and sang the toughest rendition of his strongest song, 'Leave You In The Hands Of The Lord,' that anyone had ever witnessed. The audience was completely devastated. Sisters by the armful were being carried out by attendants. Pandemonium ruled everywhere. Back in the dressing room, his impressed co-workers heaped Big Henry with praise. He responded quietly with notice to quit. The Blind Boys were reluctant to let Big Henry go, but he had made himself larger than the sum of the members he had to share the music with. He just did not fit anymore.

Sandy Foster, Big Henry's permanent replacement, has never been able to figure out why the Big Man up and quit and believes he did so for no good reason. Foster was obviously out of touch with the dynamics of the situation. Big Henry simply wanted to go his own way.

For a little while he sang with Melvin Boyd and the Ohio Wonders, then with Johnny Mills and the Inspirational Souls. Both groups had recorded for Milton Rose and Bro Duke Henderson's Proverb label and subsidiary, Gospel Corner, on South Central Avenue in Los Angeles. Both Paul Foster Snr of the Soul Stirrers and Lloyd Woodard of the Blind Boys had at one time or another recorded for Proverb Records. They would both come into the picture a little later on. At this point, Big Henry felt he needed to build a gospel quartet around what he wanted to do and have it go where he wanted it to go. After turning down offers to sing with both the Swanee Quintette and Blind Boys of Alabama, Big Henry formed the Starlight Quintette (named after his own childhood church back in Orange, Texas) with the help of old friend, lead tenor Bill Smith. The quartet easily secured a recording pact with Peacock Records, as Big Henry was himself still under contract with the company. The group that recorded the initial session in Houston in late 1965 was composed of Big Henry and Bill Smith, first and second leads, Bill's brother Gene, tenor and guitar, Roy Dodson, tenor and bass guitar, and H.B. Yarborough. The Starlight Quintette cut six singles between 1965 and 1969. Big Henry both managed and took care of most of the musical arrangements. Songs included the sweet-sounding 'Someone who cares,' the high octane, paint-stripping belter 'Ain't Nobody's Business,' the anguished ballad 'Building, daily building,' and a blues-soaked arrangement of 'Work Until My Days Are Done.'

In 1966, Paul Foster Snr signed on with the Starlights for a short period. A year later Lloyd Woodard joined the group for a spell. Years before when Foster and the Soul Stirrers were singing on a program

with the Blind Boys, he warned Big Henry of what could happen to his voice if he sung that hard every night. After hearing Big Henry perform, he changed his tune and told him to keep on doing what he was doing. Big Henry knew how to save his voice.

In 1969, the Starlight Quartette split up. Bill Smith, who had gotten very sick, had to have both legs amputated (presumably from diabetes.) In 1970, Big Henry married Dorothy Jean, who helped Henry stay on the right track. He found there was more to life than trying to out-impress everyone. Peacock Records issued a single from an early Blind Boys session. One side featured Rev. Willie Mincey singing 'My Soul Is A Witness' in a ragged but fiercely tormented style, one reminiscent of old times. The reverse found Big Henry singing, hollering, screaming and testifying on the Swan Silvertones' old nugget, 'Love Lifted Me.'

'Love Lifted Me' conveyed how well the group had perfected their harmonies and how powerful a force they had become among travelling gospel troubadours, but that was all in the past. After many years in semi-retirement, Big Henry made his comeback with the L.A. Harps of Joy, a group founded by its manager, Bob Esters, who first enlisted Bob Jackson, who currently serves as secretary, then Willie Crawford, followed by Big Henry, and finally George Chambers, bass player and tenor singer. Chambers had sung for many years with his world-renowned family group, the Chambers Brothers. The L.A. Harps of Joy put out a promotional CD recently. The playlist includes the beautiful 'Move In This Place' done in acappella. This song is also rendered acappella in live performance. Big Henry sings softly and sweetly, slowly creeping up the aisles of the church, the group following at a distance in whispering, soothing acappella harmony. Big Henry stops and grabs a sister by the shoulders and with his singing roots the devil out. The sister, drifting in uncontrollable ecstasy, falls out and is steadied by the members of the congregation around her. Soon, more sisters, seated in various parts of the church, fall into swooning. Big Henry has the church in his hands and with the wave of an arm can render the place to absolute peace.

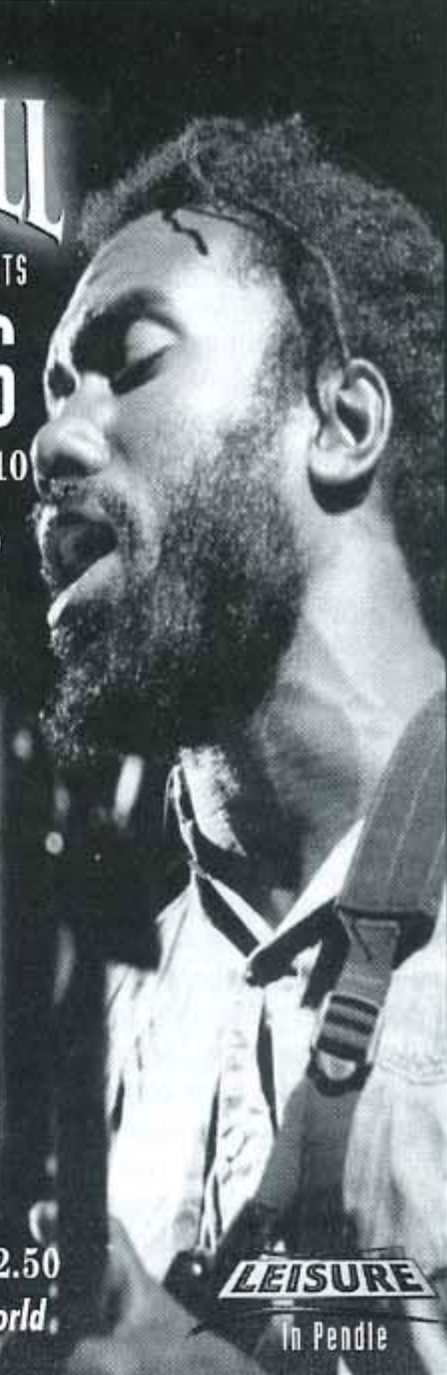

The CD also includes the Sam Cooke/Soul Stirrers classic, 'Touch The Hem Of His Garment.' This too is sung tenderly and with much heart. 'I've always wanted to sing Sam Cooke songs,' says Big Henry. His performance on this CD proves he still has the power to sing as delicately and effectively as he would, were he shouting down the church. All power to him.

Sadly, Big Henry Johnson died on December 10th, 1999. See B&R 147 for a full obituary.

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