



THE CHOSEN GOSPEL SINGERS

by Opal Louis Nations

The Chosen Gospel Singers were one of the great post-war jubilee quartets of the fifties whose history is a complex and confusing one. The saga begins with founder and bass singer, **J.B. Randall**. Randall was born in Huntsville, Texas. After his parents' separation, he was taken by his mother to Grapeland to be raised by his stepfather. Grapeland, just north of Crockett, was a rural area full of cotton fields. Randall, the son of sharecroppers, picked cotton as a boy on Richard Bennington's farm.

Some time between 1928 and 1930, Randall got together with local cotton field workers and formed a group called **The Silvertones** of Grapeland, Texas. **Andrew Campbell, Willie West Stubblefield, Jeff Walker, Randall**, and his brother, **J.W. Johnson** were all teenage members of this group. In 1935, The Silvertones were fortunate enough to get a weekly radio broadcast over KNET in Palestine, Texas. During the group's tenure at the station, they were recorded without the group ever knowing about it. It was not until 1945, ten years after the fact, the group learned that test pressings had been made from tapes of their KNET broadcasts and that some of these had ended up in the hands of RCA Victor which surreptitiously issued two songs on a 78 record, "You Sing On" backed with "Precious Lord".

The Silvertones were a fine quartet and once beat out the famous **Stamps-Baxter Quartet** in open competition. In 1939, Randall moved to Huntsville and joined the unrecorded **Gospel Five** composed of himself, **Jimmy Johnson, Walter Louis, J.W. Johnson, and Willie Rose**. Two years later, Randall moved to Houston and organized **The Outstanding Five** made up of **Keith Barbour** (who later joined **The Pilgrim Travelers**), **E.J. Bedford** (Brumfield?), **Aaron Wyatt**, Randall's brother **J.W. Johnson**, **R.W. Medlock** (the brother of **James H. Medlock** of **Soul Stirrers** fame), and himself.

Randall moved to Shreveport in early 1950, where he sang briefly with **Willie Gaston** and "**Charlie Boy**" **Grey** in **The Ever-Ready Gospel Singers** and **The Spiritual Stars** who later recorded for Chess. Upon returning to Houston in the fall, he organized and trained both **The Outstanding All-Stars** and the original **Chosen Gospel Singers** who included **Aaron Wyatt** and **Willie Rose** from **The Outstanding Five**, a man remembered as **Files**, a baritone singer named **Sheridan**, **George Butler**, and himself singing bass. Randall trained **The Chosen Gospel Singers** seven nights a week for four months, each session lasting ninety minutes. It should be noted that **Paul Foster Sr.**

also sang sporadically in **The Chosens** between periods with **The Soul Stirrers** and **Golden Echoes**.

Joe Johnson quit management of **The Pilgrim Travelers** and joined **The Chosen Gospel Singers** to handle bookings and business affairs. **Joe Johnson** then moved the group to Los Angeles where he had had considerable experience in finding work for his talent.

Files, **Sheridan**, and **Aaron Wyatt** did not enjoy being away from their families and quit for home. It was then, according to **Joe Johnson**, that **Preston Woody** (or **Whittaker**) from Virginia was taken on as tenor and instructor. **Sam Thomas** was elected baritone, **Randall** stayed as bass, his brother **J.W. Johnson** stayed on as tenor, and the **Rev. John Evans** from Houston was taken on as lead. **Randall** disagrees and states that **Evans** did not join until later. He further asserts that **Oscar B. Crooks** from Shreveport and the late **George Butler** of Houston were in the group and that his brother **J.W. Johnson** chose to stay home.

Soul blues tenor **Ted Taylor** from Oklahoma City sang in the group briefly. By the date of the group's first session for Specialty in November, the lineup had changed again. **Butler**, **Randall**, and **Crooks** were still there, and tenor **Fred Sims** from Minden, La. was added along with lead tenor and baritone **Edward James Brumfield**. **Brumfield**, born in 1928, had sung in a gospel group with his brothers, called **The Bolliver Harmony Four** and was taken aboard by **Joe Johnson**. The group's first big record came from this initial session, "One-Two-Three", an acappella walking rhythm song on which both **Fred Sims** and **George Butler** shared leads. Information concerning the group's Specialty recordings can be found in **Lee Hildebrand's** and my notes to a recent Fantasy CD reissue put out in 1992.

Three years, four sessions, and as many personnel changes later, **The Chosen Gospel Singers** signed with **Nashboro Records**. Group personnel on the initial November 1955 session included the deeply soulful yet ragged baritone voice of Brooklyn-born **Robert Crutcher**, **Tommy Ellison**, who had just quit **The Harmonizing Four**, **Edward James Brumfield**, **Thurston Woodward**, **Sam Thomas**, and **Thomas Spann** fresh out of **Charley Storer's All Stars from Brooklyn**.

Robert Crutcher was **Lou Rawls'** short-serving replacement in the group. **Rawls** had joined the Army by the time the outfit cut its final Specialty session in February 1955. **Crutcher** had served in **The Mid-South Singers** of Detroit who recorded for **JVB** and **Duke** during the early 1950s. Leaving **The Chosens** after their initial Nashboro session, **Crutcher** drifted in and out of groups, ending up in **The Swan Silvertone Singers** as **Dewey Young's** temporary replacement in 1957.

In an interview with **Ray Funk**, **Edward James Brumfield** states that after serving in the teenage **Bolliver Harmony Four**, he sang briefly in two outfits around Shreveport before moving to Los Angeles and singing for equally short spells with **The Fairfield Four**, **Dixie Hummingbirds**, and **The Heaven Bound Four** from out of Shreveport. **Brumfield's** sister sang in an all-gal group called **The Golden Echo Singers** who recorded for **Peacock** in Houston.

Four songs surfaced from the group's first Nashboro session, "It's Alright", a slow, low-down drag-'em-out dirge hard-sung by lead soloist **Robert Crutcher**, "When The Saints Go Marching In", a bouncy hoo-doo-like chant cranked up

first by Crutcher, then brought to the boil by Ellison who pours on sanctification, "Hallelujah", a joyous, get-happy song sung in verse alternation by Crutcher and Ellison, and "This Old Soul Of Mine", a beautiful soul searching ballad rendered plaintively by Ellison.

The Chosens encountered a degree of turmoil and confusion during 1956. **Joe Hinton** is believed to have sung in the group at this time, although he would have had to take leave from **The Spirit Of Memphis Quartet** on Peacock Records with whom he was pacted between 1956 and 1958. Joseph Lee (Joe) Hinton from Evansville, Indiana, first sang professionally in **The Blair Gospel Singers** during the early '50s before his Spirit Of Memphis tenure and was persuaded by Peacock's president Don Robey to switch to soul music in 1958.

Brumfield states in an interview with Ray Funk that when Rawls left the Army he joined The Pilgrim Travelers. The only work Rawls did with the group was a single live engagement in Little Rock. "The group had advanced so far along that they didn't need him anymore", asserts Brumfield. But this was not so, as Lou Rawls can be heard quite plainly and prominently on two of the four numbers of the January 1957 session, "Walk With Me", a rousing mid-tempo tune in The Soul Stirrers vein (not to be confused with the traditional spiritual) and "Won't Be Back", a heart-aching shuffle sung with grace and passion.

Rawls' gospel background is extensive. Born in Chicago, he first sang as a seven-year-old soloist at the Mount Olive Baptist Church, then graduated to full membership as a soloist in "The Teen Age Kings of Harmony & their Queen". After a brief stay, he switched to **The Holy Wonders Of**

Chicago, with whom he recorded for the Premium label. The Holy Wonders evolved into **The Highway QC's**. After a short stint with The Highway QC's, he signed with The Chosens for the first time in 1954. Rawls was taken into the group by manager Joe Johnson who became a close friend. (Rawls officiated at Johnson's recent funeral.)

The remaining two numbers from the second Nashboro session were "Troubles Of This World Condition", steered by a frantically fervent Ellison, and the song-sermonette "Do Thy Will" on which Crutcher testifies tormentedly. Thomas Spann says that after the 1957 session, Joe Johnson took sick and, without work, the group split up. Spann, Ellison, and Crutcher stuck together as a unit at first, hoping to form a group but conflict in musical tastes set them apart and plans fell through.

Ellison went on to form **The Five Singing Stars**, Crutcher joined The Swan Silvertones briefly but gradually sank into alcoholic oblivion, and Spann started actively seeking recruits for his Brooklyn All Stars quartet. The Chosen Gospel Singers did not record again until the spring of 1958 when a reconstructed unit consisting of Brumfield, Fred Sims, Herbert Robinson, possibly Woodward and others, once again set foot inside the Nashboro studio. **Herbert Robinson** was on loan from Spann's fledgling Brooklyn All Stars who had just completed their first session on Peacock.

March 1958 saw the release of two new songs by The Chosens, both lead by Robinson. "Borrowed Land" is a jumpy, jazzy number whereon Robinson stretches out and drives his message home. "Lord, Shine On Me" is given a deep-soul tough-pipe treatment and is polished with tasty tremolo guitar figures. I am not at all sure whether

Robinson actually leads on "Lord, Shine On Me". The elusive Joe Hinton could very well be the actual lead.

By the end of the decade, The Chosens had disbanded and Robinson had joined Jo Jo Wallace and **The Sensational Nightingales**. In 1962, Brumfield, who now had control over The Chosens' name, reformed a fresh outfit out of singers he had brought to Los Angeles from Tyler, Texas. He called the group **The New Chosen Gospel Singers**. Members included Brumfield, **Willie Neal Johnson**, **Sam Butler** on guitar, and two guys remembered only as **Archer B.** and **Ralph**.

The New Chosen Gospel Singers recorded four songs in 1963, with Willie Neal Johnson at the helm. "Let Your Life Speak Out" is a righteous gospel soul anthem sung with grit and bravado. "You'll Need The Lord" is a fast-paced chart that chugs along to shouts, whoops, and tight organ and guitar accompaniment. "I'll Be There" is a superbly rendered reading of "Somewhere Listening For Your Name". Johnson's sweet-edged voice lifts the song out of ordinariness. "Just Have To Cry Sometime" opens with a sermonette that leads into a loping vocal canvas of call and response spontaneity.

It seems that The New Chosen Gospel Singers only served as a unit for a year before rifts and disruptions occurred again. Momentarily, The New Chosens became **The Chosen Children Trio** which included Brumfield along with **Leon Williams** and **James Spellman**. Then Johnson, Brumfield, and **Paul Beasley** formed **The Gospel Keynotes** who share a long and illustrious history all their own.