



## **The Blind Boy from South Carolina – A cameo of basso Jay T. Clinkscales**

**by Opal Louis Nations**

Most folks would associate the Combs & Wright song “Precious Memories” with the classic November 1947 Decca version by Sister Rosetta Tharpe, yet the Five Blind Boys of Mississippi recorded the tune and did very well with sales some five years later on Peacock Records out of Houston. “Precious Memories” with Sam Butler’s pretty guitar and church-wrecker Archie Brownlee’s peerless top tenor stanzas is co-lead by bass singer Jay T. Clinkscales. This is practically the only time Jay T. switches from pumping bass to swing lead in his entire tenure with the Blind Boys which lasted from 1950 right up to his appearance in the theatrical production of “Gospel at Colonus” with Clarence Fountain and The Blind Boys of Alabama in the 1980s.

Jay (John) T. was born in Abbeville, South Carolina on January 6<sup>th</sup>, 1919 (although his daughter Jackie Ray asserts that 1920 was the year of his birth.) His mother was a homemaker and his father worked in the coal mines, as did founding members of the famous Swan Silvertone Singers in pits not too far away. Seeking a better life, Jay T. and his parents moved to Cummingsville in Southern Ohio, a place so small you won’t find it on the AAA road atlas. In Cummingsville Jay T. sang in a small choir called the Masters of Harmony at the Durr Street Methodist Church under Rev. Giles’ pastorship where he was noticed by his wife-to-be, Hattie, born December 28, 1922. “I was singing in a choir, too, but I didn’t know Jay T.,” says Hattie, “but a friend of my brother’s, Harold Fletcher, knew Jay T. and introduced us. Soon we had a foursome going, with Harold and Gussie and me and Jay T. We were kinda close and really in

love. We were all very young. I was only seventeen. We decided to elope and travel to Covington, Kentucky to get a marriage license. Jay T and I got married in Cincinnati in 1939 and our friends Harold and Gussie tied the knot a year later.”

After traveling from church to church with the choir, Jay T. Joined the unrecorded Starlight Singers. Some time during the late 1930s he went to work at an auto repair shop where he came into contact with sulphuric acid found in defective car batteries. Sometimes an explosive gas would form on the tops of the batteries. Hattie maintains that the hazardous chemicals that leached from the batteries began to have an injurious effect on Jay T’s eyes. He had had no problem with his eyes up to this point and indeed never had to wear glasses.

The couple’s daughter, Jackie, was born in 1941. When World War II broke out, Jay T. went to work in the aeronautical industry as a fry cook. In those days, African Americans were consigned to the most menial jobs when it came to serving their country in the U.S. Armed Forces. Cooking was something he had learned from Hattie as she was a wizard with the pans. Gradually Jay T’s eyesight deteriorated and his ability to lead a normal, functioning life began to spin out of control. He found he could not cope with his disability and started taking it out on himself and then on Hattie. “He started hitting and beating me around. Then one time he held my arm over the electric range,” says Hattie. “He lost control of himself and I just couldn’t cope any more. I was trying to raise a child and keep a home together.”

Just before blindness took him completely, Jay T joined the renowned Volunteer Gospel Singers of Cincinnati. The Volunteer Gospel Singers hold the distinction of recording two records in 1955 with cross-over R&B singer Ida Haynes for Angle Tone Records. Their full names are long forgotten but the Volunteer’s first lead singer, “Lott” Nelson, went on to improve his singing career in Los Angeles. In 1949, shortly before Jay T and Hattie’s divorce, Jay T was picked up in Cincinnati by sighted baritone singer / manager, Rev. Percell Perkins of the Blind Boys of Mississippi. Joseph Ford, who had been the quartet’s former bass singer, was tired of constant travel on the road and wanted a rest. Jay T, without much persuasion, stepped into his shoes. Interestingly, Jesse Brown, who sang in the live performances with the Blind Boys during the 1940s, claims that Jay T was his replacement in the group and not Joseph Ford. (See Jesse Brown’s article in Blues & Rhythm #224, November 2007.)

This was not the first time Jay T had crossed paths with the Blind Boys. They had met in 1948 when the group had made Cincinnati their year-long base of operations. By this time, Jay T was sightless. Strangely, records of his illness show that Jay T suffered from a paralysis of the optic nerves. Could car battery cells have anything to do with optical paralysis?

Hattie moved out to San Francisco and filed for divorce. She joined the Bethel AME Church under the pastorship of Rev. Dixon and befriended “Pinkie” Terrell, wife of the late Paramount Gospel Singers’ founding tenor, Gino Terrell. The Paramounts were starting out and were largely sponsored and affiliated with the Solid Rock Baptist Church. The group’s second baritone singer, Archie Reynolds, brought some of the leading, nationally famous touring groups into town to appear with the Paramounts on special programs. This included the Blind Boys of Mississippi. “Pinkie and I would go out to the programs in Oakland and I’d stay friends with Jay T. Sometimes I’d take his favorite treat – banana cake – to his suite at the California Hotel after we split up,” says Hattie.

Jay T moved to Philadelphia. One day during a gospel package program at Harlem's Apollo theatre, Jay T was introduced by a Davis Sister to his second wife-to-be, Gertrude. On the program the Blind Boys of Mississippi were headlining with the Swan Silvertones, Swanee Quintet and Davis Sisters. One of the Davis Sisters was Gertrude's sister-in-law. The couple married, had one son, "Little Jay" and Gertrude became Jackie's stepmother.

Starting in April 1950, Jay T with Archie Brownlee and the Blind Boys of Mississippi recorded the first set of what was later to become a series of the group's most cherished recordings for Peacock Records in Houston. The line-up was composed of legendary shout singer Archie Brownlee, lead tenor, Rev. Percell Perkins, sighted second tenor/baritone and manager, Lawrence "Shorty" Abrams, tenor, Lloyd Woodard, baritone / narrator, and Jay T. Clinkscales, bass.

This line-up more or less held together throughout the better part of the 1950s, except for the temporary replacement of Perkins for hard singer Vance "Tiny" Powell during the latter part of 1950 into 1951. The Blind Boys toured and recorded extensively. In September 1950, the fellas recorded "Our Father," a song composed to the words of The Lord's Prayer. The record really took off and successfully competed for airplay against strong contenders like Sam Cooke and the Soul Stirrers' reading of "Jesus gave me water" and Sister Rosetta Tharpe's warbling of "So high." The record sold steadily throughout 1951 and 1952 and Lillian Cumber's Herald Attractions booked then all over the United States, headlining with such major luminaries as the Spirit of Memphis and Gospel Harmonettes.

The group's follow-up, "He's my rock" with Archie Brownlee and Vance Powell trading lead licks, also sold well for the group. In April 1954, Peacock's Don Robey opened his new Houston recording studios on Erastus Street, having moved from a smaller premises on Lyons Avenue. The first gospel group to use the new studio was the Blind Boys who by now had become the label's most valuable religious commodity, often competing for concert sales with artists on the rhythm & blues side of the Duke / Peacock catalog. One of these artists was Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown who quipped "I've been in this blues racked a long time and I know if I'm gonna make a dollar. But I can't play in the same town at the same time the 5 Blind Boys are working." This was despite the heavy sales of "Gatemouth's" hard-hitting "Okie Dokie Stomp."

The appearance on Thurman Ruth's sell-out Gospel Caravan at the Apollo in January 1956 marked the peak of the Blind Boys' live stage career. Herald Attractions rebooked almost the entire caravan for a repeat appearance over the Easter season. By May, with the group now based in Chicago, the outfit had defected to Vivian and John Carter's thriving up and coming Vee Jay label, a deal set up by manager Lucky Hollins. Vee Jay's gospel artist stable was impressive, second only to Peacock in quality and talent. It is pretty accurate to say that while Peacock had cornered the gospel market in the Southlands, Vee Jay ruled over the North-East and Mid-West.

During the spring of 1957, Vee Jay Records had three major selling gospel records vying for airplay. The Swan Silvertones' "That day on Calvary," the 5 Blind Boys' "Let's have church," and the Staple Singers' ethereal "Uncloudy day" which had exceeded the 100,000 sales mark. For "Let's have church," Vee Jay transformed its studio into a live church setting with members of the Vee Jay staff serving as congregants. The result was a song / sermon of great power and enormous conviction. This led to inclusion in the grand "Big

gospel Cavalcade of 1957,” a touring package of artists booked on a eight-week road trip by the Willard Alexander’s Talent Agency, starring the Clara Ward Singers, Soul Stirrers, Gospel Harmonettes, 5 Blind Boys, Caravans and others.

The package, modeled around the presentation of the Newport Jazz Festival, would hit ballparks, arenas and major auditoriums. There was no doubt that popular Afro-American gospel music had reached a zenith, a high point never quite matched for over three decades. Later on, community-based church choirs eclipsed the popularity of quartet singing. Archie Brownlee’s incredible falsetto screams were hushed when he died in 1960. Abrams, Woodard and Clinkscates continued on. Woodard passed in the mid-1970s and the last of the originals, “Shorty” Abrams, died in 1982.

Jay T. Clinkscates passed away in Philadelphia on May 13, 1997. His daughter Jackie, currently sings in the choir of the Bethal AME Church in San Francisco. There will never be another quartet quite like the 5 Blind Boys of Mississippi ever again.

— Opal Louis Nations  
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