

hoto courtesy of Opal Louis Nations

## The Dynamic Cotton Brothers of Macon, Georgia

hen I first heard the Cotton Brothers' album, Having Church in Georgia (CB Enterprises 1985), I could not believe my ears. Not since the release of the Mighty Clouds' devastating Live at the Music Hall (Peacock 134, 1967) has such strong sanctification been committed to wax. Rarely does a live quartet album light up with solid conviction these days, now that

choirs and divas pretty much rule the bestsellers charts. When Tommy Cotton told me that the Cotton Brothers were sounding better now than back in the 1960s when the original outfit recorded for Don Robey's Song Bird label, I did not believe him. Somehow, a fresh and dynamic strength seems to have taken hold of them. They have stayed with the old-time way of singing and have rejected the phony commercialization that has

dominated the music.

Tommy Cotton Jr., the oldest brother, was born Sept. 24, 1937 in Marshallville, Georgia, in Macon County north of Montezuma. Parents Floyd and Helen King Cotton raised 16 children in all, ten boys and six girls. Being share-croppers by necessity, they opted to raise a large family, as the more offspring, the more money could be made out in the fields. Although the Cottons worked for a

man named Isador, they moved around some, working as general farm laborers where needed. Crops raised included root vegetables, cotton, corn and peanuts. After a short spell in Chattanooga, Tennessee, the family moved back to Macon in Bibb County. Tommy remembers picking cotton and fetching and carrying food and water buckets out to the fields all day long. Despite the fact that Floyd and Helen took time out to teach the children everything they knew, they still set their workdays to allow the children to take time off to go to school. Tommy attended both Unionville Elementary and Ballard Hudson High. Floyd was able to get some education, and he served as Deacon of the Center Hill Baptist Church in Macon.

The Cotton Boys started an a-cappella gospel group in the mid-1950s. In fact, because there were so many males in the family, more than one quartet was formed. By the end of the decade, the principal quartet was John, alto, John "Joe", lead, Timmy, second lead, Willie, tenor and basso A.C. Cotton, with James Blount on guitar and John Paul on bass. At high school Tommy befriended Sylvester "Huck" or "Vessy" Huckaby with whom he played on the basketball team. "Vessy" was Otis Redding's bodyguard, a man who became notorious for hauling off jealous husbands at live Redding concerts.

"Vessy" introduced the Cotton Boys to Redding and they all became firm friends. Later on, they would go out and visit Redding over at his farm in Round Oak. The boys, knowing quite a bit about dirt farming, could teach Redding a few things about living off the land.

Some time in 1961, the Cotton boys ventured down to the Macon Professional Building to see Bobby Smith armed with two songs John "Joe" and Tommy had written and arranged, "Remember Me" and "Be There Directly" (sitting down). Tommy was appointed manager and spokesman for the group. Bobby Smith, who later on went to work for Syd Nathan at King Records, was then starting Confederate Records and had signed the blue-eyed soul singer Wayne Cochran and his band to play as the label's studio band. Cochran played bass on Redding's initial Confederate release of "Shout Bamalama" in 1962. The Cotton Brothers cut a demo at Confederate, with Cochran on drums, of the two songs they had

taken along and pressed up a few copies on their own freshly invent-

ed Blue Top Records.

The Blue Top release was sent out to various local deejays like Frank Clark at WNEX and Deacon Hamp "King Bee" Swain at WIBB. Swain jumped on the beautiful "Remember Me" and played it until it became a popular favorite around Macon. Even Redding loved it and swore to record it himself in a similar arrangement, which he did. Nobody seems to know when exactly Redding recorded his reading of "Remember Me." It showed up for the first time on a 1992 Stax collection of the same name, subtitled 22 previously unissued tracks (Stax CD 8572.)

Swain received so many requests for "Remember Me" that his faith in it lead him to send the vanity Blue Top pressing to major independent record companies like Nashboro, Savoy and Peacock / Song Bird in Houston. Don Robey instantly liked the record and signed the Cottons to Song Bird Records. The first Song Bird session took place in 1964. Files show different lineup appeared on the remake, with two studio musicians added on organ and piano. The vocal lineup included first son Tommy, second lead tenor, second son Rev. (now Bishop) John "Joe", first lead tenor/baritone, third son Willie, tenor (who also drove the guys to gigs), fourth son A.C., basso, with fifth son John singing alto. Blount and John Paul sat in on guitar and bass.

After the Song Bird release the Cotton Brothers toured the nation and Canada. Atlantic Records made the brothers an offer to sing soul music, but the group turned them down. "Be There Directly" / "Remember Me" came out in late summer 1964. "Be There Directly" starts out with a sermon and jumps into a joyous celebration of sitting with the angels. "Remember Me," lead by Billy, is a soulful ballad sung so liltingly it catches and stays with you awhile. No wonder it stole the hearts of the church around Macon.

The brothers had to wait almost a year before a follow-up surfaced. This was the sanctified two-part sermonette "Life is Too Short," a Violinaires-type wailing chorus behind a story concerning a vintner's parody on the shortage of labor. "Life is too short" had to compete with other hard-edged current contenders in the Song Bird catalog, and they were plentiful, for example, the Powerlites'



pewburner "Waiting," the Sweet Brothers' "God is Love" and the Singing Crusaders' devastating church-wrecker "Ships a'-Sailin."

Mid 1966 saw a third release, the ecstatic "Love Lifted Me," pitched with Tommy's rendering of the spiritually uplifting "This World" (is coming to an end.) A year later saw the release of Tommy's soulfully funky arrangement of "Amazing Grace," sandwiched with a partially narrated "Children's Prayer" (when I lay me down to sleep.)

In the late spring of 1968, the Cotton Brothers had out the pretty deep-soul-sounding "Conscious," backed by the stomping "Holy Dance" (come and go with me.) Robey stepped up his Song Bird release schedule as singles by the Sweet Brothers, Kansas City Melodyaires and Soul Searchers breakneck tempoed "Alright, Alright" was matched with the

Photo courtesy of Opal Louis Nations seemed to be catching the public's attention. The Cottons' final single release hit the streets in 1969. The lovely "Gift," a soulful ballad that

could just as easily have been presented with a few baby word substitutes as an R&B opus.

These last two singles together with an Impressions-like reading of "Rich Young Ruler" and a cloistered version of Gene Allison's "You can make it if you try" made it onto one side of a Song Bird album shared with the Sweet Brothers entitled "The Revealing Book of Life" (Song Bird 219).

In 1970, John "Joe" was called into the ministry. He became pastor of the Greater Overcoming Church of God in Christ in Macon-a switch from Baptist over to the Holiness Church. The group split up. Willie took up bus driving, Billy worked for the government as an equipment mechanic and vehicle operator and A.C. became an electronics engineer. At one point John operated two restaurants in Georgia and briefly proprietored one in New Jersey. He operated under the name Saint Cotton's Fried Chicken. Forty-two years ago Billy married Bernice Jones Cotton who became a celebrated gospel deejay on WBML.

In 1985, Bishop John (Joe"), Tommy and Willie got together again and cut an album, the aforementioned Having Church in Georgia, at the Bishop's church at 1708 Third Street in Macon. The boys had set up the CB Enterprise Booking Agency to handle their own business affairs. The album featured the song "Another New Year" which became a particular favorite among fans. It was later taken for singles release. As sons and daughters came along, a new Cotton Brothers group was formed, The Cotton Brothers Jr's. This outfit consisted of Elder Lewis Cotton, Nathaniel, Eddie, Larry, Charlie and James Cotton who also served as master of music. From this aggregation was drawn a third group called 100% Cotton. 100% Cotton is more in keeping with the times, and does not hold so rigidly with traditional gospel singing, opting for a more open-harmony type of approach.

In 2001, 100% Cotton put out a CD called The Family Pack, Vol. 1 also available on cassette. The collection was dedicated to those who died on 9/11/2001. This and their truly essential Having Church in Georgia album are available from Cotton Ministries, P.O. Box 13565, Macon, GA 31201.

 Opal Louis Nations, November, 2008 With invaluable help from Tommy Cotton

