

# The Georgia Louis Story

by Opal Louis Nations



Georgia Louis with the Voices Of Faith on the television show, *Gospel Time*, circa 1964. Courtesy Georgia Louis.

**M**y first encounters with gospel diva Georgia Louis were when she was the frequent host of the filmed, one hour long, nationally syndicated gospel programme, 'TV Gospel Time'. The show was produced by Howard A. Schwartz and directed by Peter Brusuc, with expert musical direction from keyboardist, the late Professor Alfred Miller.

Sadly, 'TV Gospel Time' only survived two seasons in 1964. It was filmed mostly in Nashville, but also occasionally (to save costs) in cities where guest artists were located. The programme, designed for a churchgoing black viewing audience, was the first of its kind to introduce the best in black gospel music to the large white population. Its demise was due to the fact that most church-going folk were at church at the time of broadcast! The show, designed like a church service, was

sponsored by manufacturers of products aimed at the black community and was usually comprised of a choir, a host or host soloist, a quartet and/ or a female aggregation.

On programme Number 57 (Fisk University Library's system), Georgia sings a rousing rendition of Mahalia Jackson's arrangement of 'I'm On My Way', with the Voices of Faith Choir. On that same show she dueted with ex-Swanees Quartet preacher Reuben Willingham on Rev. B.H. Hogan's 'Amen'. On an earlier programme hosted by the great Ethel Davenport, she sang the traditional 'Walk With Me' with much skill and grace.

This was a song she earlier recorded for the Spiritual label. On an early filming in December, 1962 she sang with the Sanctuary Choir on Sister Rosetta Tharpe's interpretation of 'Walk All Over God's Heaven', she also filmed a moving version of 'You're Not Alone', a song made widely popular three decades later by Amy Grant.

Georgia told me that she often took fellow guests into her home whenever they appeared on the programme. Because 'TV Gospel Time' has never been commercially available to the general public, it is very difficult to assess the total amount of Georgia's work, either as shown, or held in the can for future

programmes. She told me she appeared on the show many, many times. Georgia's voice is always rich, warm and golden in tone, she uses it soulfully without the extravagance of too much overstatement. Her precious few recordings, which we shall talk about later, are a testament to this.

Georgia Louis was born in Belmont, Alabama some time in the early 1940s (she is reluctant to give out her exact birth date). The family was comprised of eight boys and four girls; only Georgia showed any propensity for music. Her mother, Anna Branch, was a homemaker who enjoyed singing hymns at church, a small clapboard building called Bucks Chapel. Her father was a sharecropper; later on in life he quit sharecropping and found himself a job working for Allison Lumber. The family moved to Bellamy, Alabama when Georgia was three years old. The Friendly Baptist in Bellamy became the family church. Georgia's first efforts at singing filled the household when she was a toddler, it was not until she was twelve years old that she managed to gather enough courage to stand up and sing at The Friendship Baptist. This made such an indelible impression that she was asked to sing solos at morning services.

Both Mahalia Jackson and B.B. King became her fond favourites and strongest influences. On one occasion,



the underage Georgia snuck into the Ala-Miss Club and met her idol, B.B. King. Georgia would sing along to anything that took her fancy on the radio, she would wait until her mother was out of the house to sing blues. Anna did not allow any singing unless it was gospel, she made a point of encouraging Georgia to take solos at morning services, she was proud of Georgia's talent.

Georgia graduated in general education from Sumter County's Training School in Livingston, Alabama. She moved to Stamford, Connecticut and found she liked the climate. Since then she has moved around the state, from Stamford to Western, from Western to Redding, then finally to Bridgeport a couple of years ago. While at Stamford she found a job at the Double Glow factory making Christmas decorations.

Georgia was in the habit of singing during working hours. Naomi Steely, a fellow worker burdened down with family problems heard her sing, Georgia's voice seemed to brighten Naomi's life. One day Naomi invited her to join the Warble-aires Gospel Singers, a large, female choral aggregation. During rehearsals the group was visited by Carlo Martingoni, who hosted a regular radio show over WSTC in Stamford, called 'Breath Of Italy'. Out of fifteen prospective Warble-aires singers, Carlo picked Georgia to sing on Italian Feast, a celebration that usually took place in Little Italy, New York. The Italian Feast group was made up of singers from the local community, the group, who retained the name the Warbleaires, was accompanied by pianist Henry Askew.

Some time during 1959 Carlo Martingoni and his wife formed United Talent Assoc. Publishing Company and in conjunction formed a record company called Fairfield, after Fairfield, the city across the Long Island Sound from Bridgeport where Naomi was born. The Warble-Aires' first release on Fairfield pairs James Cleveland's lilting 'Every Now And Then' with a rousing reading of Herbert Brewster's 'Move On Up A

Little Higher'. Although Georgia's soloing does not quite jell with the choral backing, her masterful lead comes through perfectly. Henry Askew both played piano and served as musical director.

In 1960 Georgia left the Warble-Aires to go solo. However, the group recorded a second release for Fairfield on which Georgia's voice is blended in the chorus. "I did not want to lead the group," says Georgia, "as I was out there as a solo item." Most of the Warble-Aires have since passed. In 1961 the Martingonis set up the Spiritual label 100 series expressly to promote Georgia's talents. Spiritual 103, Georgia's initial release, included a beautifully rendered Latin-tinged 'Motherless Child', plus an r&b inspired arrangement of 'Walk With Me Lord'.

Both songs are exquisitely sung, accompanied as on all Spiritual releases, by Hugh E. Porter on piano, George Khriakis and Ed Cholakian, guitars, and Roy Snow, bass. Spiritual 104 is yet more impressive. Georgia's rendering of C.D. Martin's 'His Eye Is On The Sparrow' is pure magic, perfectly enhanced with the Khriakis/ Cholakian blues based rhythm accompaniment. The song is pitched with a uniquely soulful version of the traditional 'Steal Away To Jesus'. A third release surfaced in 1962, with the pairing of Georgia's 'Trouble In The Mind' and 'Can't Keep From Crying', sung with flair and gusto. Dr. William H. Collins directed, with Hugh Porter on piano.



Georgia Louis promotional photograph from the early 1960s.

Some time during Georgia's early solo career she guest sang with a local group called the Northern Gates. She ventured into radio and co-hosted, along with Carlo, a regular gospel and international folk music programme over WSTC in Stamford. Their major sponsor was Feenamint, the same company who sponsored 'TV Gospel Time', local supermarkets also gave support in return for promotion. Georgia eventually had to drop the show when she went out on the road on extensive tours, the station refusing to accept pre-recorded programming. She started by touring the South, from Washington to Alabama during the Freedom Rides. Peace officers armed with rifles welcomed her arrival at bus stations, it was impossible to find accommodation because her entourage was made up of both black and white artists, and she was forbidden from singing in her own home town. Things improved with a tour of Canada through Ontario and Quebec, but money was thin and at times she was so hungry she had to stop and steal grapes from roadside vines. Her break came when she was invited to play a series of theatre engagements in London, England, returning three times and where, for the first time, she saw Ray Charles.

Georgia retired for good in 1988 and commenced teaching singing to students shortly thereafter. In 1989 she cut a handful of self-produced gospel songs - traditional standards set to rock-band instrumentation. She formed a six-member group from her students in the late 1990s, called Voices Of Joy. The music was authentic and traditional; many of the members broke away to become noted soloists in their own right.

## GEORGIA LOUIS SINGLES DISCOGRAPHY

### Henry Askew, piano / Musical Director with Warble-Aires Choir

Every Now And Then	Fairfield 101	(1959)
Move On Up A Little Higher	Fairfield 101	(1959)

### Bill Porter, piano, George Kiriakis and Ed Cholakian, guitars, Roy Snow, bass with the Warble-Aires

Motherless Child	Spiritual 103	(1961)
Walk With Me, Lord	Spiritual 103	(1961)
Steal Away To Jesus	Spiritual 104	(1961)
His Eye Is On The Sparrow	Spiritual 104	(1961)

Right Road, Wrong Road	also Spiritual 104	(1961)
Going Home	also Spiritual 104	(1961)

### Dr. William H. Collins Orch. With Hugh Porter, piano

Can't Keep From Crying	Spiritual 203	(1962)
Trouble In The Mind (sic)	Spiritual 203	(1962)