THE BACK HOME CHOIR

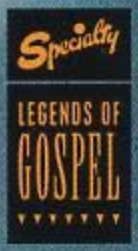
Golden Gospel Age Choirs

THE PENTECOSTAL CHOIR OF DETROIT

1954–1963

THE HELEN ROBINSON YOUTH CHOIR

VOICES OF VICTORY



Choirs and large choir-like ensembles dominate contemporary African-American gospel music, and one such group, Kirk Franklin and the Family, has even made significant showings on the pop, R&B, and Contemporary Christian (white gospel) charts. The situation was not always such, however. Soloists, small groups, and quartets—not choirs—were the primary purveyors of gospel music during the genre's early decades of development, the Thirties and Forties, and even during the so-called Golden Age of the Fifties.

The gospel sound, as pioneered by composer and song publisher Thomas A. Dorsey, was spread from city to city and church to church during the Thirties and Forties by such soloists as Mahalia Jackson and Willie Mae Ford Smith, by groups like the Roberta Martin Singers and the Sallie Martin Singers, and by the Soul Stirrers, the first quartet to popularize the new gospel style. These singers found receptive audiences in some churches, while they were turned away from others by conservative ministers who found their music too radical.

Most African-American church choirs favored spirituals, hymns, and anthems, and spirituals were the forte of such professional touring ensembles as the Fisk Jubilee Singers of Nashville and Wings Over Jordan from Cleveland. The first choir to specialize in the new gospel style was formed in 1931 by Dorsey and fellow songwriter Theodore R. Frye at Chicago's Ebenezer Baptist Church. The following year Dorsey, Frye, and Magnolia Lewis Butts organized the National Convention of Gospel Choirs and Choruses, Inc.

Although gospel music gradually made inroads into church choirs, few if any gospel choirs recorded prior to the end of World War II. St. Paul Baptist Church, one of a handful of older African-American churches in Los Angeles at the time, began incorporating gospel songs into its choir's repertoire at the behest of Rev. John L. Branham, who came west from Chicago in 1943 to serve as assistant pastor. Branham became St. Paul's chief pastor in 1946 and hired Wings Over Jordan alumnus J. Earle Hines to direct the choir, which began recording for Capitol the following year. The St. Paul Church Choir was an immediate sensation, cutting over a dozen 78s (from which two long-playing albums were later compiled) for the label between 1947 and '50, some fea-

turing Dorsey protégée Sallie Martin and her adopted daughter Cora. The gospel choir's unprecedented success inspired countless church ensembles across the U.S. to follow in its footsteps.

Another Los Angeles church that welcomed gospel music during World War II was Victory Baptist, founded in 1943 by the Slidell, Louisiana–born Rev. Dr. Arthur Atlas Peters. In 1949, his church began a weekly radio broadcast called "Voice of Victory." On Easter Sunday, April 5, 1953, "Voice of Victory" also became a television show. Sponsored by the Gold Furniture Company and carried live every Sunday between 8:30 and 9:00 p.m. over KTTV (Channel 11), the TV remote lasted for several years and gave Victory Baptist a level of visibility and degree of prestige unequaled by any other African-American church in Southern California during that period.

The telecast was of such importance to Peters that he hired Thurston Frazier, a stylistic disciple of J. Earle Hines (and, like Hines, a former member of Wings Over Jordan) who had become one of the busiest and most innovative young figures on the L.A. gospel scene, to direct the Voices of Victory, which combined the church's three large vocal ensembles—the Inspirational Choir, the A.A. Peters Chorale, and the Victory Baptist Choir—into one powerhouse entity of over a hundred voices.

The church, which was (and remains) located at the corner of 48th and McKinley, not far from fabled Central Avenue, had over a thousand members. "It was a pretty large church," recalls Robbie Preston Williams, who served as the Victory Baptist's pianist for over 30 years. "When we did the telecast, we had standing room only. It was noted for the choir."

The Voices of Victory made their recording debut on September 25, 1953, cutting two selections—"I'm So Glad Jesus Lifted Me" (the same song the St. Paul Church Choir had recorded at its first session over six years earlier) and "I'm Trusting in Jesus"—for Decca. Seven months later, they went into Capitol Studios to make a ten-inch album for Choir Records, a subsidiary of Contemporary Records so short-lived that the Voices' LP was its only release. Intended to simulate an actual church service, the album begins with an invocation and ends with a benediction, both delivered by Peters, who also offers the black histo-

ry monologue "I Am Somebody," the title of which presages Rev. Jesse Jackson's popular black-pride slogan by nearly two decades. (Peters, a political progressive, later became the first president of the Los Angeles chapter of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.) Although Peters often sang on the broadcasts, for some reason he chose not to do so on the album.

The LP also reprises the wonderfully spirited "I'm So Glad Jesus Lifted Me," although Frazier's lead was heard to better advantage on the Decca version; the balance on Frazier's gritty baritone improves, however, for "Lord, Lord, Lord," on which he duets with Helen Carter. Other highlights include Anna Bell Polete's soaring soprano on "The Angels Keep Watching" and an uplifting Frazier arrangement of "Blessed Assurance," featuring the soulful alto pipes of Helen Henderson.

Although the Choir LP was a strong seller in Southern California, the Voices of Victory recorded only one other album—in 1959 for Warner Bros. Frazier had left by that time, having organized the highly influential Voices of Hope in 1957 with former Mahalia Jackson pianist Gwendolyn Cooper Lightener. In his book *How Sweet the Sound: The Golden Age of Gospel* (Elliott & Clark Publishing, 1995), Horace Clarence Boyer writes: "Frazier's choral style, much closer to James Cleveland's than Thomas A. Dorsey's, anticipated the style of the 1970s and 1980s, with its three rather than four parts, a full bright sound, and rhythms closer to those of rhythm and blues than to those of Negro spirituals." Frazier was murdered in 1974.

Back in Chicago, headquarters of the gospel movement, New Orleans–born singer, pianist, and songwriter Helen Robinson organized her seven children and 13 others from the neighborhood into a choir that at first rehearsed in the back of the Robinson family's general store at the corner of South Wentworth and 32nd Avenue. The youth choir made its first record, a single for Vee-Jay, in 1956, and in 1959 signed with Specialty Records. Seven selections were recorded at a session (which was not supervised by James Cleveland, as we had mistakenly claimed in the credits of the Specialty CD *Women of Gospel's Golden Age, Vol. 1*) held on July 15, 1959, but none were released, as Specialty was

at the time winding down operations.

Only three songs from the session seem to have survived, yet they reveal a finely polished ensemble with a repertoire distinctly different from that of most other gospel choirs. "Sit Down Children" (an alternate take of which appears on the aforementioned CD) features the aching contralto voice of Helen's daughter Jeanette on a haunting near–a cappella arrangement of a quartet tune popularized two years earlier by the Gospelaires of Dayton, Ohio. "Working on the Building" and "Run & Help Us Tell" draw on even more traditional sources.

After its aborted association with Specialty, the Helen Robinson Youth Choir recorded singles for the obscure New and Mag-Oll labels but found a greater degree of success later in the Sixties through albums on Vee-Jay and Atlantic. Helen Robinson died in 1993; Jeanette Robinson continues to sing at Chicago's Good Samaritan Baptist Church, pastored by her husband, Rev. Billy Jones.

Less polished than the Robinson choir, but still highly spirited, is the Pentecostal Choir of Detroit, which made albums for Wingate and Tamla before cutting a third for Prestige's short-lived Tru-Sound subsidiary in 1963, two selections from which are included here. Directed by Rev. Columbus Mann, the choir was made up of singers from various Church of God in Christ congregations in the Detroit area.

Tru-Sound scored something of a coup in 1962 when it signed the Back Home Choir of Newark, New Jersey in 1962. Led by Rev. Charles Banks and his brother Jeff, who had sung together in the influential Mary Johnson Davis Singers before launching their highly innovative Banks Brothers singing duo in 1950, the Back Home Choir was the most visible large gospel ensemble in America during the late Fifties and early Sixties. After appearing at the Newport Jazz Festival on the afternoon of July 7, 1957—the stunning performance was captured on one side of a Verve LP—the 60-voice choir made albums for RCA Victor, Vee-Jay, and Gospel before recording the Tru-Sound album, reissued herein in its entirety. Most of the choir's original singers had been members of Newark's Abyssinian Baptist Church, but its success led Charles to launch his own Greater Harvest Baptist Church. By the late Sixties, Jeff too had

become a minister, of Newark's Revival Temple Church of God in Christ, and the choir came to comprise singers from both denominations.

Besides the anguished baritone of Charles Banks, the Tru-Sound session is notable for the compositions and distinctively choked vocal style of Joe DeLoatch, who also sang with Leon Lumpkins's forward-looking Gospel Clefs. Jeff Banks, who remained a popular gospel recording artist until his death in 1997, is featured vocally in duet with soprano Ophelia Little on the lovely "Jesus." With their imaginatively crafted, wonderfully thrilling choral arrangements, Charles and Jeff Banks set new standards of professionalism in gospel choir performance that would inspire innumerable other vocal ensembles. Among these was the Angelic Choir, from nearby Nutley, New Jersey, whose 1963 Savoy recording of "Peace Be Still" with James Cleveland was such a massive hit that it ushered in the present era in which choirs are gospel music's preeminent force.

—LEE HILDEBRAND AND OPAL NATIONS, 1997

The period from the mid-Forties through the Fifties has come to be regarded as the Golden Age of African-American gospel music. Specialty Records, founded in 1946 by Art Rupe, was one of the first companies to nurture this flowering of creativity and remained at the forefront of the genre for a decade and a half. The Pilgrim Travelers, the Soul Stirrers (featuring R.H. Harris, Sam Cooke, and Johnnie Taylor), Sister Wynona Carr, Brother Joe May, Dorothy Love Coates and the Original Gospel Harmonettes, the Original Five Blind Boys of Alabama, the Swan Silvertones, and Alex Bradford are only a few of the giants of gospel's Golden Age who were discovered and/or given wider exposure by Art Rupe. The Legends of Gospel Series salutes and celebrates some of these gospel stars who found their place in the history of American music at Specialty Records.

The Back Home Choir:

RECORDED AT VAN GELDER STUDIO, ENGLEWOOD CLIFFS, N.J.; (PROBABLY) OCTOBER 24, 1962. A&R: **OZZIE CADENA**

REV. CHARLES BANKS—VOCALS, ORGAN **JEFF BANKS**—VOCALS, PIANO, DIRECTOR
HERBERT RANKIN—CO-DIRECTOR **JOSEPH E. DeLOATCH, JR., WALTER STRAITEN, ELLA HENRY, JANIE ROSS, LORETTA HARRISON, JOYCE TOWNES, RUDY TREDWELL, AGES PRESLEY, JOHN DAVIS, ROOSEVELT BELTON, CATHALENE BELTON, FANNIE DIXON, ROBERTY GARY, WILLIAM THOMAS, MILDRED LANE, MELVIN FRAZIER, RUSSELL BLANDING, DAVID STEWARD, HELENE MORANT, ISABELLA RUDOLPH, ADELE WOULARD, BEN SIRMANS, MINNIE E. SIRMANS, WILLA TROUTMAN, JAMES HILL, TRESSY LOFTON, ELLA ADAMS, GERALD MURRAY, DOLORES JACKSON, JO ANN COMER, BRENDA WRIGHT, ARLENNE PLEASANT, BOBBY WRIGHT, JAMES FORD, CLARA TERRY, ROSETTA SANDERS, ALICE McCLOUD, VERA HILL, MARION STEWARD, DOROTHY DAVIS, MARGARET TOMLIN, ANN COLBERT, NAOMI JACKSON, THELMA YOUNG, SADIE B. FORD, JOHN SIRMANS, OPHELIA LITTLE, TOMMY REED, FANNIE THOMAS, BERTHA J. McKELVEY, LULA GILLESPIE, BARBARA GRAHAM, ROBERT ROSS, VIOLA SMALL, CAROL BROWN, PAT HARRELL, THOMAS PURYER**—VOCALS

1. ## HE'S SO MIGHTY
(Joseph DeLoatch) publ. unknown 2:30
SOLOIST: **JANIE ROSS**

2. ## I TRUST HIM
(DeLoatch) publ. unknown 3:20
SOLOISTS: **OPHELIA LITTLE, MILDRED LANE, MINNIE SIRMANS**

3. ## RIDE ON KING JESUS
(trad.) P.D. 2:30
SOLOIST: **SIRMANS**

4. ## WITHOUT GOD I CAN DO NOTHING
(Beatrice Brown) publ. unknown 2:30
SOLOIST: **WILLIAM THOMAS**

5. ## HE KNOWS HOW MUCH WE CAN BEAR
(trad.) P.D. 4:05
SOLOIST: **REV. CHARLES BANKS**

6. ## CLIMBING HIGH MOUNTAINS
(Hines-Johnson-Williams) Reginald Music-BMI 3:00
SOLOIST: **REV. CHARLES BANKS**

7. ## COME OUT THE WILDERNESS
(Banks) publ. unknown 3:40
SOLOIST: **JOSEPH DeLOATCH**

8. ## YES I FOUND HIM
(DeLoatch) publ. unknown 4:15
SOLOIST: **ROBERT ROSS**

9. ## JESUS
(trad.) P.D 4:36.
SOLOISTS: **LITTLE, JEFF BANKS**

10. ## JORDAN RIVER
(trad.) P.D. 3:15
SOLOIST: **REV. CHARLES BANKS**

The Pentecostal Choir of Detroit:

UNIVERSAL SOUND SYSTEMS, DETROIT, MI; JANUARY 28, 1963. A&R: **OZZIE CADENA**

REV. COLUMBUS MANN—DIRECTOR **REV. CLEMMON ANDERSON**—PRESIDENT
CURTIS LEWIS—PIANO AND/OR ORGAN **BEVERLY GLENN**—PIANO AND/OR ORGAN
RONALD KERSEY—UNKNOWN INSTRUMENT (PROBABLY DRUMS)
JAMES PITTMAN, ANNE PAYTON, DOROTHY PITTS, HUGH JEWELL, MARY JACKS, WAYNE CROSBY, RUTH OKEYS, DORIS JONES, UNKNOWN OTHERS—VOCALS

11. PRAYER WHEEL TURNING OVER
(Columbus Mann) Pentecostal Music-BMI 3:15

12. HOW GLAD I AM
(Curtis Reginald Lewis) Pentecostal-BMI 4:15
SOLOIST: **JAMES PITTMAN**

The Helen Robinson Youth Choir:

UNIVERSAL RECORDING STUDIOS, CHICAGO, IL; JULY 15, 1959. A&R: UNKNOWN

HELEN ROBINSON—VOCALS, DIRECTOR
JEANETTE ROBINSON, AUBREY PETTIS, UNKNOWN OTHERS—VOCALS
UNKNOWN—ORGAN, PIANO, DRUMS

13. SIT DOWN CHILDREN (TAKE 1)
(Robert Lattimore) Duchess Music-BMI 2:13
SOLOIST: **JEANETTE ROBINSON**

14. WORKING ON THE BUILDING (TAKE 2)
(trad., arr. Helen Robinson) publ. unknown 2:25
SOLOIST: **AUBREY PETTIS**

15. RUN & HELP US TELL (TAKE 5)
(trad.) P.D. 2:54

Voices of Victory:

CAPITOL STUDIOS, HOLLYWOOD, CA; MARCH 31, 1954. A&R: UNKNOWN

REV. DR. ARTHUR A. PETERS—SPEAKER

THURSTON G. FRAZIER—VOCALS, DIRECTOR, ARRANGER

LOIS SMITH, ANNA BELL POLETE, HELEN CARTER, HELEN HENDERSON, C.C. PERKINS, UNKNOWN OTHERS—VOCALS

HELEN C. PERKINS—ORGAN

ROBBIE L. PRESTON—PIANO

16. INVOCATION (THE LORD'S PRAYER)
(trad.) P.D. 1:02
SPEAKER: **REV. A. A. PETERS**

17. I'M SO GLAD JESUS LIFTED ME
(trad.) P.D. 3:14
SOLOIST: **THURSTON FRAZIER**

18. THE ANGELS KEEP WATCHING
(Thomas Dorsey) Unichappell-BMI 4:20
SOLOIST: **ANNA BELL POLETE**

19. GREAT CHANGE IN ME
(trad.) P.D. 1:50

20. LORD, LORD, LORD
(Alex Bradford) ATV Music-BMI 2:02
SOLOISTS: **HELEN CARTER, FRAZIER**

21. I AM SOMEBODY
(writer unknown, probably A.A. Peters) 2:33
SPEAKER: **PETERS**

22. BLESSED ASSURANCE
(Fanny J. Crosby) P.D. 3:12
SOLOIST: **HELEN HENDERSON**

23. BENEDICTION (THE LORD'S PRAYER)
(trad.) P.D. 1:11
SPEAKER: **PETERS**

SPCD-7068-2

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10. JORDAN RIVER

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COMPILED AND PRODUCED FOR REISSUE
BY **LEE HILDEBRAND** & **OPAL NATIONS**

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#13-15 ARE PREVIOUSLY UNISSUED.

REMASTERING, 1997—**KIRK FELTON**
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