

21 Vee-Jay originals

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GOLDEN AGE of GOSPEL



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If religion really is "the opiate of the people", as Vladimir Ilyich Lenin would have us believe, then Afro-Americans must surely be vinyl junkies of the first order! Gospel music has not only been, in its own right, a pivotal element of black culture – it has also wielded inordinate influence over the development of popular American music in general and soul music in particular. Scan the CVs of any of the major vocal acts on Motown, Stax, Atlantic, Chess and the other great record labels of soul music's development and you will almost certainly find that they share two things: roots in America's Deep South and an early introduction to singing as members of church choirs, often from as early an age as three or four.

James Brown, Wilson Pickett, Curtis Mayfield, Marvin Gaye, Otis Redding and countless others came up this way. Aretha Franklin was the classic example, her father being the Reverend CL Franklin whose holy-roller hot gospel sermons gave him a string of hot-selling albums as a Baptist preacher before his three daughters, with not a little encouragement from family friend Dinah Washington and aunt Clara Ward – a formidable gospel artist herself – began recording gospel records.

It was the late, great Sam Cooke – another close family friend – who encouraged Aretha, Carolyn and Erma to eventually cross the divide into secular soul music. Cooke's own transition from the divine to the profane had created as much of a stir as, in their time, did Elvis's first hip gyration and Bob Dylan's going electric. Light-skinned, well-groomed, soft-spoken and intelligent, Cooke was seen as a black artist with the potential to reach out to the mass white audience at a time when racial segregation was still a hot topic.

So the man who, as first a member of the Highway QCs and then as lead singer of the seminal Soul Stirrers, had been gospel music's greatest star, thanks to such truly majestic records as *Touch The Hem Of His Garment*, found himself singing such secular but equally impassioned lyrics as *Bring It On Home To Me* and *A Change Is Gonna Come*. Such outings created instant classics of the emergent soul idiom of which he is rightly credited as being one of the three key founder fathers, along with James Brown and Ray Charles. Never mind that Cooke found himself showcased with rather effete, watery, almost MOR backing tracks (especially the back-up vocals), Cooke's highly emotive gospel-laced vocals served to define a powerful new music force.

At its most potent, the secularisation of gospel into soul often involved the use of tunes and lyrics straight out of Nashville's country music songbook. Just listen to Bobby Bland, Bettye Swanne or Blues Boy Willie's superb readings of Merle Haggard's *Today I Started Loving You Again* and you will understand the definition of what British soul writer and guru Dave Godin tabbed "deep soul".

And if you want to hear soul music as deep as it gets and then some, you could do worse than turn back to the roots and start exploring the rich, dark loam of black gospel music, as presented on this present fine album, culled from the vaults of Chicago's renowned Vee Jay label and bringing together some of the greatest names of a wonderful music form whose appeal goes far beyond the ranks of Sunday churchgoers and born-again Christians. Indeed, it might be ironic but the truth is that many of the most devoted collectors and aficionados of this music that I have come across down through the years are self-professed atheists!

Of course, many of the gospel acts themselves didn't exactly follow the strict ministrations of their own songs and in many cases their on-the-road womanising, drinking and other antics often matched or exceeded the levels achieved by the most outrageous of heavy rock acts – even if the haircuts were short and suits and ties were de rigueur dress code. Sam Cooke's tragic death by shooting in a Los Angeles' motel room had sordid undertones and the exact truth has never been determined.

The cross-over between gospel and soul was matched by the mix of hard commercialism and genuine missionary zeal. Many specialist gospel music labels emerged through the years but many of the best gospel records appeared under the same logos as pop, rock, country and easy-listening artists.

That was certainly the case with Vee Jay, a company set up in Chicago, in 1955, by record store owners Jimmy Bracken and his wife Vivienne Carter to showcase the talents of bluesman Jimmy Reed and doo-wop act The Spaniels. Though never quite matching the stature of that other great Chicago label, Chess – who scored massively with the blues of Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf, the rock 'n' roll of Chuck Berry and Bo Diddley, the soul of the Dells and the jazz of Ramsey Lewis – Vee Jay's catalogue expanded quickly, bringing John Lee Hooker such massive hits as *Boom, Boom* and *Dimples* which, licensed to EMI's Stateside label, even managed to take the blues into the UK pop charts. The trade was a two-way affair because Vee Jay became, for a brief period, the US imprint for records by The Beatles! Frank Ifield and white America's own brilliant harmony act The Four Seasons (led by the wondrous falsetto stylings of Frankie Valli) gave Vee Jay added pop music success but it was in gospel music that the company expanded most rapidly.

A second office was opened out on the West Coast but as so often happens, Hollywood brought broken dreams rather than fame and fortune. A victim of its own success, Vee Jay had over-reached itself. Hot 45s and potent albums were shipping out of the warehouse as fast as they could be pressed but cashflow never caught up with the mounting stack of bills sitting on Vivienne Carter's desk and in May 1966 the creditors went for the company's jugular, moved in and wound-up the business.

It was an early warning of the kind of financial duress which a decade later would bring the mighty Stax Records empire crashing down, leading the judge at that company's bankruptcy proceedings to wryly observe: "It strikes me that running a record company is akin to playing Russian roulette – with six bullets in the chamber!"

Vee Jay and Stax had more in common than a shared fate. Arguably, the greatest gospel act of them all, and certainly the most commercially successful, **the Staples Singers** were to headline on both labels. The family group's Vee Jay outings, like the spine-tingling *Uncloudy Day*, included here, found them at their most raw, with **Mavis** taking lead, backed by sisters Cleotha and Yvonne, brother Pervis and father Roebuck "Pops" Staples, a veteran (born on December 28, 1915) who, well into his eighties, continued to turn out truly majestic records as we moved into the third Millennium and was working right up to his death in December 2000. His unique and instantly recognised rich, rolling guitar sound (rooted in the powerful blues of the Mississippi Delta, where he grew up before moving north to Chicago), allied to his formidable and equally distinctive vocals and



The Harmonizing four

talents as a songwriter made Pops the Staples Singers' key figure, even though it was Mavis, as lead singer, who got most of the spotlight attention.

Another artist who wound up under the Stax imprint, making soul records, was Chicago's **Johnnie Taylor** – who should not be confused with the equally talented and so similarly named Little Johnny Taylor. There's a lovely story that the mother of Johnnie (the one spelt with an "ie") spotted a billboard advertising a forthcoming show, bought tickets and turned up on the night to find it was not, as she'd expected, her son on stage but the Johnny Taylor who spelt his Christian name with a "y"! To further confuse matters, they both recorded successful versions of *Part Time Love*, a potent song composed by the one who spelt his name with a "y".

Our Johnnie Taylor followed Sam Cooke as lead singer of **the Highway QCs** (recording Vee Jay tracks such as *God Has Not Promised*, included here) before again stepping into Cooke's shoes, fronting up the Soul Stirrers. Maintaining the

connection, it was the Sar label, set up by Cooke and his manager JW Alexander (a former member of the Pilgrim Travellers gospel group), which gave Johnnie Taylor his first outings into the secular soul music field with cuts which were leased in the UK by Soul City, the independent label run out of a London record shop by the aforementioned Dave Godin. In the late Sixties he became a major artist on Stax Records with the multi-million selling *Who's Making Love*. He had disco hits with Columbia before moving into a vintage-style R'n'B mode with Malaco, for which label he recorded until his death at the age of 62, in 2000.

One of the most important acts to record for Vee Jay was the Talladega Institute's **Original Five Blind Boys of Alabama**, a group founded way back in 1944, and by that time fronted by **Clarence Fountain** on tracks such as our selection, *I Can See Everybody's Mother*. As much an institution in their field as the Ink Spots, the Platters and the Drifters have been in theirs, the Blind Boys' career spanned the decades, setting the standards for other acts to follow. Originally formed in 1940, Chicago's **Sallie Martin Singers** were another ground-breaking group to join the Vee Jay fold; their 1961 recording *The Old Ship Of Zion* is included here.

Shirley Caesar, who along with soloists Albertina Walker and Inez Andrews routinely fronted **The Caravans**, has been similarly influential, rating comparison with Mahalia Jackson, Clara Ward, Odetta and the other distaff greats of gospel music. Much the same can be said of the awesome **Dorothy Love Coates** and the late great **Marion Williams**, both of whom are showcased here backed by **the Gospel Harmonettes** and **The Stars of Faith** respectively.

Another jewel in the Vee Jay crown, **the Swan Silvertones** from West Virginia rate comparison with the Mighty Clouds of Joy, the Gospelairens and the other great close harmony groups whose status in gospel matched that of the Impressions, the Temptations and the Four Tops in secular black music. Their extremely rare version of *Oh Mary Don't You Weep* recorded at Radio WENW in Bessemer, Alabama is included here featuring the ethereal **Reverend Claude Jeter** and **Paul Owens**.

Heard here playing piano on **the Famous Boyer Brothers'** cut, **Professor Alex Bradford** played an important part in bringing gospel music to a wider audience. Crossing the Atlantic in the early Sixties, he staged the highly successful *Black Nativity* Christmas musical which became a smash hit in the UK (and whose cast included Madeline Bell, who stayed on in London and eventually became lead singer of Blue Mink, who notched a massive pop hit with *Melting Pot*). **The Patterson Singers** were also to find a huge following, especially in Continental Europe.

While somewhat lesser known, the other fine acts showcased here all have the power to take you back to church, to the kind of hand-clapping, testifying, soul-stirring ambience evoked by James Brown in that great in-church get-on-down scene from the cult movie *The Blues Brothers*. It doesn't really matter if you might be Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Humanist or even agnostic or atheist (like my aforementioned collector friends), this music has an innate ability to stir the emotions and move the soul.



The Swan Silvertones

Roger St. Pierre

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GOLDEN AGE of GOSPEL

1. **Leave You In The Hands Of The Lord** - ARCHIE BROWNLEE & THE ORIGINAL FIVE BLIND BOYS OF MISSISSIPPI
(Brownlee) Copyright Control ©1958
2. **Uncloudy Day** - MAVIS & THE STAPLE SINGERS
(Alwood, Kinsey, Arr. Staples) Tristan Music Ltd. ©1956
3. **I Can See Everybody's Mother** - CLARENCE FOUNTAIN & THE ORIGINAL FIVE BLIND BOYS OF ALABAMA
(Jackson, Lightener) Jackson Music Studio ©1963
4. **No Coward Soldier** - SHIRLEY CAESER & THE CARAVANS
(Herndon) Screen Gems-EMI Music Ltd. ©1962
5. **Operator** - BILL SPIVERY JR. & THE FRIENDLY BROTHERS
(Spivery) Tristan Music Ltd. ©1959
6. **Motherless Child** - JIMMY JONES & THE HARMONISING FOUR
(Trad.) Public Domain ©1957
7. **God Has Not Promised** - JOHNNIE TAYLOR & THE HIGHWAY QCS
(Taylor, Flowers) Copyright Control ©1960
8. **Prayer For Tomorrow** - OFFIE REECE & THE KELLY BROTHERS
(Reece) Copyright Control ©1956
9. **Camp Meeting** - DOROTHY LOVE COATES & THE GOSPEL HARMONETTES
(Trad., Arr. Coates) Tristan Music Ltd. ©1963
10. **If Jesus Came To Your House** - REV. JAMES WILLIAMS & THE SKYLIGHTS
(Blanchard, Ashley) Chelsea Music Publishing Co. Ltd. ©1958
11. **Oh Mary Don't You Weep** - CLAUDE JETER & PAUL OWENS With THE SWAN SILVER
Recorded at Radio WENW Bessemer, AL
(Trad.) Public Domain ©1958
12. **Surely God Is Able** - MARION WILLIAMS & THE STARS OF FAITH
(Brewster) Carlin Music Corp. ©1963
13. **Sinner's Crossroads** - SILVER QUINTETTE
(Sibley) Tristan Music Ltd. ©1956
14. **The Tragedy Of Kennedy** - SOUTHERN BELL SINGERS
(Smith, Barnett) Peermusic [UK] Ltd. ©1963
15. **Family Prayer** - SPIRITUALARIES OF COLUMBIA, S.C.
(Derrick) Tristan Music Ltd. ©1957
16. **The Road Home** - ALONZO E. EUBANKS & THE INTERNES
(Eubanks) Copyright Control ©1958
17. **He Lives** - THE WATSON SISTERS
(Watson) Tristan Music Ltd. ©1963
18. **The Old Ship Of Zion** - SALLIE MARTIN SINGERS
(Trad., Arr. Dorsey) Warner Chappell Music Ltd. ©1961
19. **When The Saints Go Marching In** - THE PATTERSON SINGERS
(Black, Purvis) Copyright Control ©1962
20. **Going Back To God** - FAMOUS BOYER BROS. With PROF. ALEX BRADFORD on Piano
(Boyer) Tristan Music Ltd. ©1954
21. **Amazing Grace** - MACEO WOODS
(Watts, Arr. Woods) Copyright Control ©1954



Professor Horace
Clarence Boyer

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Dorothy Love Coats & The Original Gospel Harmonettes



Shirley Caesar & The Caravans



**The Original Five Blind Boys of Alabama
with Clarence Fountain**