



R.H. Harris

& The Christland Singers / Gospel Paraders

By Opal Louis Nations

There is no doubt that Rebert H. Harris is one of the most important innovators and tenor stylists in the history of post-jubilee gospel quartet. Harris created the concept of a second lead singer, turning quartets into quintets and providing for consistent four-part harmony under the alternating lead singers. He also introduced the concept of add-libbing lyrics, singing in delayed time, and repeating words in the background. His unique, sometimes spellbinding, off-times acrobatic high tenor curliques and vocal ornamentations have found their way into the "trick-bags" of vocalists from Sam Cooke down to the present day secularizations of Otis Clay.

Rebert H. Harris had at one time headed up one of the most revolutionary gospel quartets in history, the soul-based Soul Stirrers. According to Jay Warner in his book "American Singing Groups" (Billboard Publications, 1992), "The Soul Stirrers developed in an upper room at 1608 Andrew Street in Houston, Texas in September, 1929. Walter Lee W.L. La Beaux wanted to form a quartet. He chose the name The New Pleasant Green Gospel Singers from The New Pleasant Green Church and in September organized the foursome with himself serving as tenor and manger, Edward Allen, (E.A.) Rundless Junior of Wallaceville, Texas (second tenor), C.N. Parker (baritone), and W.R. Johnson (bass). After four years, Johnson died, and O.W. Thomas took his place. A year later, Parker passed on, and Senior Roy Crain of Trinity, Texas joined in his stead."

Contrary to this information, Ray Funk asserts in his Soul Stirrers article published in Rejoice Magazine that the roots of the group are traced to 1926 when Crain himself picked up a bunch of teens from out of New Pleasant Green. This unnamed teenage quartet lasted only a few years, performing locally in and around Trinity. When the kids graduated high school, they quit the group, scattered, and headed for work in the big cities. Funk goes on to say that Crain then moved to Houston, worked in a rice mill for two years, then hooked up with La Beaux's group. At that time, they changed the group name to The Soul Stirrers of Houston, Texas.

In 1934, W.L. La Beaux chose to join the ministry, and A.L. Johnson took his place. Shortly before La Beaux's departure, the group recorded for The Library of Congress under the supervision of Alan Lomax. The Library of Congress made four field recordings of The Soul Stirrers in Austin, Texas. Funk states that Lomax described the recordings as "the most incredible polyrhythmic music you ever heard."

Jessie James (J.J.) Farley, bass singer of Pennington, Texas, came into the group in July 1936. Rebert H. Harris, second tenor, of Trinity, Texas, was taken aboard a year later. Both men were brought to the group by Crain. Jay Warner describes the 1937 group as being made up of Crain, first tenor, Harris, second tenor, Johnson, baritone, M.L. Franklin of Trinity, Texas, second tenor, and Farley, bass.

Harris brought to the group a knowledge of shape note singing culled from his father, Reverend James S. Harris, who pastored a local church and taught shape note in Trinity and surrounding areas. Harris borrowed from the shape note style and with a good ear for chordal harmony, developed fresh arrangements from traditional gospel standards normally given a straight ahead jubilee performance. Harris states that when he joined, The Soul Stirrers were already working full time on the road, having travelled throughout the forty-eight states. When the group arrived in Chicago in 1937, they took the city by storm. In 1939, The Stirrers began performing on radio alongside the all-white Stamps-Baxter Quartet who were very popular among African-American folk.

In the early forties, the outfit, billing themselves as The Five Soul Stirrers, recorded for the tiny bronze label on East Vernon Street in Los Angeles. One recording was issued and later leased to Jack Lauderdale at Swing Time Records for second release. After a name change to The Five Gospel Souls, the group waxed for the Ebony/Harlem recording company in 1945. Four sides were initially released. The entire masters were later sold to Ivan Ballen in Philadelphia who put out a total of six songs by the group on his Gotham label.

1945 also saw the election of Rebert H. Harris to the honorary status of Major of Bronzeville, a campaign sponsored by The Chicago Defender, a black newspaper. Bronzeville was the nickname given to the black neighborhoods of Chicago.

By now, The Five Gospel Souls/Soul Stirrers' membership had more or less solidified for a while. At this point, the group included Harris, Crain, Thomas L. Bruster, baritone, R.B. Robinson, baritone, Farley, and Heywood "James" Medlock, baritone. Changing their name permanently to The Soul Stirrers, the group signed with the Mesner Brothers' Aladdin records label on the West Coast in 1946. Three years and twenty-four 78 recordings later, the group switched to Specialty Records of Hollywood and the awesome lineup of Harris, Crain, Robinson, Bruster, Farley, and the great Paul Foster Snr came to the fore. The history of The Stirrers on Specialty has been fully documented by myself and others elsewhere.

In 1950, Harris and The Stirrers cut two sessions for Specialty, one in February, and the other in July. Most of the songs from these sessions, with alternates and previously unissued takes, were made available on CD in 1992. Heywood "James" Medlock was only present in the group for the second session. In August 1950, Harris made the decision to retire from the road in an effort to spend more time with his wife and two children. Harris had created The National Quartet Convention in Chicago in the late forties and also wanted to devote more time to that. Tony Heilbut in his book, "The Gospel Sound," quotes Harris as saying that he quit The Stirrers because "the moral aspects of the thing just fell into the water."

Harris objected to the commercialization of gospel which drew singers away from the purely religious nature of the music. Harris's wife, Jeanette, sang in The Golden Harp Gospel Singers of Chicago who cut two singles for Peacock Records in 1951. Excellent recent examples of this group's work can be found on Tony Heilbut's "Soul of Chicago" collection issued on the Spirit Feel label in 1993. Rebert and Jeanette divorced in 1960.

Funk states in his Rejoice article that R.B. Robinson had started working with a bunch of West Side Chicago kids who wanted to sing quartet and emulate The Soul Stirrers. The West Siders, calling themselves The Highway Q.C.'s out of an attachment to the Highway Missionary Baptist Church on Roosevelt Road, were first organized in the late forties and occasionally labeled themselves The Soul Stirrers Juniors. An already accomplished nineteen-year-old lead singer in the group was none other than Sam Cooke. When Crain heard Cooke sing, he immediately thought of him as Harris's replacement. Cooke joined The Stirrers in the fall of 1950 and made his first live appearance with the group in January 1951 in Pine Bluff, Arkansas.

Among members of an opening act was bass quartet singer Lawrence Stickman who also sang in a recent resurrection of the old Stirrers group. Stickman states that Harris was with the group at the time and it was he who introduced the young singer to the audience in an effort to soften the transition from a tried and tested veteran to a young, bright hopeful. By the summer of 1951, Harris, not fully retired, helped organize The Christland Singers to guest on local Chicago venues. Most of the organizing was done by Rev. Leroy Taylor in the time he had when he was not conducting his ministry. The group included Harris, tenor James Johnson, ex-Stirrers baritone, Rev. Leroy Taylor, baritone Heywood "James" Medlock from the July 1950 Stirrers lineup, and bass singer George Croffet who had sung in The Norfolk Singers on the Aristocrat label in 1949.

By September 1951, The Christlands had signed with Peacock Records out of Houston who had the group recorded in Chicago the following month. Four memorable songs were cut including the mid tempo "Let me tell you about Jesus," on which Harris wails and moans with abandon and "Peace in the land" piloted beautifully by a mournfully strident Rev. Taylor. The second Peacock session took place in Houston in August, 1953. Four songs were again issued from the session, most notable of which was the double-sided "Keep me" touted in the September 1954 Billboard as being "one of the most requested and popular religious waxings around for jocks and retailers." "Keep me" starts as a shared group effort and builds in heightened intensity as first Taylor, then Harris on Part Two, pour on the perspiration.

An early June 1955 issue of Billboard announces the signing of The Christland Singers to Nashboro Records in May. The group's first release, "Where could I go (but to the Lord,)" fared well but did not excite as much attention as "Keep me."

Daniel Wolff in his excellent Sam Cooke biography titled "You Send Me," describes a concert on which Harris and The Christlands match forces with Sam Cooke and The Soul Stirrers at Atlanta's City Auditorium on July 22nd, 1955. Wolff asserts that Harris had been lured back out on the gospel road for what promoter Herman Nash billed as "the first battle of song" -- old versus new, master versus apprentice. The sing-off proved that although The Soul Stirrers possessed the smoother, cleaner harmonies, Cooke (although a winning showman) was no match for Harris whose vocal skills far outshone his contemporary's.

Nashboro released its second Christlands Singers single over Christmas 1955. The burden-lifting (I'm willing to run) "All the Way Lord," the single's top side, is presented on this collection for the first time since its first reissue on a various artists collection on Columbia Records several decades ago. The B-side, "Sell out to the master," a church-wrecking, piano-orchestrated jubilation, is also currently available on "The Best of Nashboro Gospel" (Nashboro CD 4001.)

In June 1956, Lillian Cumber resigned as head of the Herald Attractions booking agency and founded her own company named after herself. The Christland Singers

were one of the first quartets signed to the new organization. Cumber also dealt with R & B acts. In November 1956, Nashboro released the awesome "You got to be born again" with Harris yanking everything out of his vocal box of tricks. The record should have sold well but, with Harris's unwillingness to travel, the single got lost in the shuffle. Months later, The Christland Singers split up.

In early 1958, Harris and Taylor teamed up to form The Gospel Paraders who waxed one single release for Nashboro, "It's worrying me," a slow, easy, wailing song on which Harris whips up a storm. "It's worrying me" did quite well for The Gospel Paraders and, to cash in on this, Ernie Young released "Sometimes our burdens are hard" backed with "He walks with me" from an earlier Christland Singers session, previously unissued. Although Harris sings on the recordings, only Taylor takes lead.

In June 1961, a reconstituted Christland Singers without Harris, under the stewardship of Rev. Taylor cut one album for Checker at their Tel-Mar studios in Chicago. The album came out in a first batch of gospel compilations on Checker's brand new 10,000 religious series. Personnel included Johnson, Taylor, and Croffet, plus baritone Thomas L. Bruster, James Washington, Robert Richardson, and Solomon "Little" King who had sung in The Four Star Quartet on Modern in 1952. The material did not quite meet the standards of the group's earlier work but overall Taylor puts out some fine lead vocal performances.

In February 1962, Harris and The Gospel Paraders, now consisting of David Clairborn, Lester Earl, Jimmie Evans, Cleveland Flicklin, Robert Pitman, and George W. Rembert signed with Sar Records on Hollywood Boulevard in Los Angeles owned and operated by J.W. Alexander, tenor and manager of The Pilgrim Travelers, and ex-Stirrer Sam Cooke. Harris cut three singles with The Gospel Paraders over a period of two years. A recent boxed set compilation entitled "Sam Cooke's Sar Records Story," issued by Abkco Records, includes half of these six songs plus "Born again," a previously unreleased tune from an August 1963 session.

In 1968, Harris, billed as Reba or Pops Harris, cut one single for the Peace label. In 1972, Harris knocked them dead on a gospel concert at the Newport Jazz Festival. Harris and Taylor returned to Nashboro in 1976 with The Masonic Quintet on an album produced by Tony Heilbut aptly titled "The Father of Them All" (Nashboro 7176.) The Masonic Quintet were composed of the Mayfields, Hugh D., W.R., and Walter, plus James Turner and Gilbert Yarbrough. With the group, and Jessy Dixon's assistance on organ, Heilbut wanted to create a little of the old Gospel Paraders magic. The album is mostly made up of fine Harris solos and Harris/Taylor duets, including an emotionally explosive reading of "He never left me alone."

Eleven years ago, Harris came out of retirement and reassembled a Soul Stirrers reunion quartet for Bruce Connor's historical cinematic documentary of the group. Harris, along with Crain, Rev. Paul Foster Snr, Earnest Smith, and basso Lawrence Stickman, gave live filmed concerts both in San Francisco and Chicago for this long-awaited movie.

Today, Crain lives in Los Angeles and Harris, after a series of operations on his throat for the treatment of cancer, stills resides close to his family in Chicago.

-- Opal L. Nations
June 1995

PROPOSED R.H. HARRIS COLLECTION PLAYLIST

With The Christland Singers:

1. Where could I go (but to the Lord) - Nashboro 556 (1955)
2. Nothing will move me (from the love of God) - Nashboro 556 (1955)
3. (I'm willing to run) all the way Lord - Nashboro 569 (1955)
4. Sell out to the master - Nashboro 569 (1955)
5. You got to be born again - Nashboro 589 (1956)
6. Jesus has a blessing - Nashboro 589 (1956)

With The Gospel Paraders:

7. It's worrying me - Nashboro 613 (1958)
8. When we reach that kingdom - Nashboro 613 (1958)

With The Christland Singers:

9. Sometimes our burdens are hard - Nashboro 621 (1958)
10. He walks with me - Nashboro 621 (1958)

Plus unreleased songs and alternate takes