

The Rev. Julius Cheeks Retrospective

by Opal Louis Nations



Julius Cheeks - 1975

As Jason Ankeny states, “at the peak of his career during the mid-fifties, the Rev. Julius Cheeks was the definitive hard gospel singer famed for his gritty, powerful baritone.” Cheeks’ approach to singing replicated the stereotypical little ‘ole country preacher who often ended his sermon in a state of emotional catharsis. Not only were other gospel leading lights influenced by his passion, artists like Robert Blair, Little Joe Willie Ligon and Clarence Fountain, but notable soloists over in rhythm & blues like Wilson Pickett, James Brown and Richard Penniman. It seems that Cheeks and the legendary Archie Brownlee of the Blind Boys of Mississippi fame founded the primal scream school of gospel singing.

Cheeks came up from dire poverty. He was born into a family of twelve children in rural Spartanburg, S.C. on August 7, 1929. The family was dirt poor share-croppers. His mother, a widow, known as “Big Chick” raised as many children as she could humanly manage, because more pairs of hands could pick more bales of cotton. Without a steady father around to help out, the children were consequently pushed out into the fields at a tender age.

Julius, nicknamed “June,” was kept out of school after second grade. By then he could sign his name but never learned to read and write. Cheeks once remarked that the family was so poor they could never afford to buy a clock. They lived mainly off fatback and molasses. June would borrow 78 RPM records of Bible readings from the locals and that way schooled himself on the Holy book. At age twelve he graduated from

field worker to water boy. A neighbor owned a radio, so June was able to catch the gospel programs of a Sunday. He enjoyed listening to the Soul Stirrers and the great Ira Tucker of the Dixie Hummingbirds.

During this period June joined a local group called the Baronets who came to the attention of Barney Parks from Greenville, not far from Spartanburg. Parks managed and brought along many gospel artists around the Spartanburg / Greenville areas, notably the Dixie Hummingbirds, Singing Sons, Mdm Edna Gallmon Cooke and the Nightingale Quartet. Parks also switched his group personnel around to meet booking requirements.

In 1949 Parks placed June with the Singing Sons who oft-times sang as a background group behind Mdm Edna Gallmon Cooke. Other members of the Singing Sons were lead tenor Dave Edrington who later joined the Sensational Nightingales in the late 1950s, tenor James Brown and basso Providence Thomas who switched over to the Violinaires and Trumpets of Joy before singing with Cheeks again in his Four Gospel Knights in 1962. Other members were believed to have been Carl Davis, who later temporarily took Claude Jeter's place in the Swan Silvertones, and Horace Thompson, also a later Sensational Nightingale.

The Singing Sons were contracted to Decca, as were the Nightingales when June went over to them in 1951. At this point the 'Gales were made up of tenor Ben Joyner who had been with the Harmonizing Four, tenor Paul Owens who founded the 'Gales in 1949, baritone / guitarist Howard Carroll who crossed to the Dixie Hummingbirds in 1953, and bass singer William Henry. Both Owens and June shared lead on June's first recording, "My rock." At this point June had not found his groove but was moving into a sanctified style through the influences of Robert Crenshaw and Archie Brownlee.

By 1952, Barney Parks had both the Dixie Hummingbirds and Nightingales signed with Don Robey at Peacock Records in Houston. The Gales were still not to the point where June could confidently carry the group as its only lead. Parks enlisted the services of the extremely underrated Ernest James who created a foil for June's extravagant vocal wildness. By this juncture other members in the group, still called the Nightingales, included tenor Joseph "Jo Jo" Wallace from the Silveraires, baritone Bill Woodruff and bass singer John Jefferson. Cheeks on his premier July 1952 Peacock session rendered to us his first two classics, "A soldier not in uniform" and "Will He welcome me there," a song he was denied taking to the climactic finish.

On the second Peacock session of October 1953 June and James sparred it out on the verses. The same was so on the February 1954 date that gave us the excellent "On the judgement day" and "I'm going on with Jesus." It might be (but this is only a conjecture) that June and Ernest James did not get along too well professionally. One can imagine conflict when it came to the choice of taking the helm on a song that both could sing equally well. This may have lead to June's short-lived departure when during the spring of 1954 he went over to the Soul Stirrers. Only one recorded song emerged from this brief tryst, "All right now," a chart filled with fire and fury. It did not take the Soul Stirrers long to conclude that Cheeks was too wild and unpredictable. This did not go down well with a group that fully relied on discipline and professional polish.

It seems that the returned Julius Cheeks and the Nightingales enjoyed a session on Peacock in December 1954, but Robey chose not to issue anything from that date. This was shortly after June had become a minister of The Church of God In Christ. The next session, in June 1955, gave us the searing "Somewhere to lay my head." With Ernest James now gone from the Gales, June was confident enough to pull out all stops.

One glorious, ravaged anthem followed another -- "See how they done my Lord" from March 1956 followed by "Burying ground," "I gave my heart," and "I'm coming up Lord." Shortly thereafter came the spine-tingling "A closer walk with Thee." Somewhere around this time the group changed its name to the Sensational Nightingales.

1959 saw the release of many of June's finest moments on an album entitled "Songs of Praise." "Songs of Praise" qualifies as being the foremost Post-War black gospel quartet album of all time, with Archie Brownlee and the Blind Boys of Mississippi's release of "Precious Memories" running a close second. All eleven songs are of the first order and the album is an essential addition to all serious gospel quartet collections.

Just before June's departure from the 'Gales in 1960, he recorded "Rock of ages" which was held from release for many years before appearing on a Song Bird (a Peacock subsidiary) various artists collection. After June's departure, although he stayed with Peacock, David Edrington temporarily took his place. Despite the fact that Otis Clay was groomed as June's replacement, he did not possess the same vocal inflections. As a permanent replacement the group chose Charles Johnson from the Gospel Consolators because Johnson did have similar vocal inflections to June's although he lacked the wild, savage, ragged delivery that only Cheeks could muster. But over time Johnson created a softer, more soulful sound, one which fitted perfectly with current trends.

It was time for June to build his own quartet, one that best suited his needs. In 1961 he gathered a group of singers who had been his singing friends for many years. They were tenor Arthur Lee "Bob" Beatty and basso Providence Thomas from the Violinaires and Trumpets of Joy, hard tenor Dewey Young from the Swan Silvertones and Horace Thompson who double-dutied with June's former group. The unnamed group's first session netted two wonderful singles with June's Wife Marianne pumping away on piano. Marianne was an extremely proficient pianist who also displayed a wild, sanctified side to her character. They had met after Marianne became Mdm Edna Gallmon Cooke's accompanist. Marianne was also a disciple of the Arizona Dranes school of methodology.

In 1963 June christened his quartet the Four Gospel Knights. Their second Peacock session took place towards the close of 1963. Here June recorded three of his best remembered songs, "Turn your radio on," "Last mile of the way" and "Mother sang these songs." All of these tunes were repeatedly rendered on his 1970s concert appearances. Cheeks and the Four Gospel Knights also appeared a couple of times on T.V. Gospel Time.

June recorded four more sessions for Peacock covering the years 1964 through 1969. Most of the songs appeared on his two excellent Peacock albums, "Rev. Julius Cheeks Sings" and "Where Do We Go From Here." During the "Rev. Julius Cheeks Sings" sessions June cut two songs for the Mighty Clouds of Joy's "Songs of Rev. Julius Cheeks" collection, a tribute to one of Little Willie Joe Ligon's principal heroes. Ligon took much from June.

June recorded infrequently during the 1970s. Liver problems and other demons associated with a hard, rough life on the road had slowed him down. In 1975 he cut one of his hardest to find albums. The label was Su-Ann and the title was "One Of These Days We'll All Be Home." The cover shows a thin, haggard man with a big, broad smile. Many of June's songs have dealt with issue's relating to the fact we are mere mortals, fated to die some day soon. The songs on the album hold with this same concern.

In 1978 June signed up with Herman Lubinsky's Savoy Records in New Jersey. His first album release, "How Far Is Heaven," (1978) supported by the Four Knights, featured two of June's sanctified standards, "How far is heaven" and "The last mile of the way.

A second collection, "Family Reunion" issued shortly after that (1978-1979) presented his sister Addie Jeter along with his niece Genobia Jeter who had since become a celebrated artist in her own right. The album sold well and remains today June's best later work.

A third set released in 1979, a double live concert recorded at the Marshall Heights Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., presents us with the Cheeks family plus Nancy Simon and the Modulations and the church's own Young Adult Choir. Here June relates with God-given certainty that "We'll lay down our lives for the Lord." As usual, the album got in the spirit and emotions rose with ever more exhilaration.

In 1980 Savoy released his fourth collection, "Somebody Left On That Morning Train," another family offering featuring Marguerite, Genobia and Addie Jeter on lead vocals. It was obvious from this album that June now needed the comfort of his family to soldier on. He always said that he would sing to his fullest conviction right up to his last day.

His last Savoy release was a live final tribute album titled "At The Gate I Know – The Legend Lives on" released in 1981 soon after June's death. He passed in Miami on January 27, 1981. Recorded in Miami, the set includes the Northern-Aires, Walker ensemble, Shining Light Choir and others paying their respects. June, not in the best of health, renders his utmost vocal efforts on "At the gate I know" and "Crying in the chapel," proving that the Rev. Julius Cheeks was not only the greatest but "the hardest working man in god's business."

-- Opal Louis Nations, March 2014